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SINISTER

By Matthew Rivett

CHAPTER ONE: THE SALT ANGELS

The isopod groaned and toppled. Spasms rippled its appendages. Its tightening carapace squeaked in the desert's quiet. Roman the radioman wanted Druscilla to end its suffering, but she resisted. Druscilla was the weapons officer but hated killing things, an irony not lost on her or her companions. And the beast would die soon enough; they also needed the ammunition. They sorted the spilled gear from the animal's satchel bags. Non-essentials and redundancies were tossed. Spare components for scientific equipment, used gray water filters, extra pairs of sun goggles were all discarded; little of it would make a difference.

"Butcher it?"

“Our rations are fine,” Dru said. “And I’m not eating another, not after the last one.”

“Stomach still sour?”

She sifted through the gear with her boot, knocking the brine crust from a set of pistol magazines. She reached down and collected the ammunition. No hostile fauna this far sunward, but abandoning a firearm, even one as inaccurate and clunky as the pistol, was bad practice. Dru preferred vigilance and deception, but such notions were overly ambitious, she supposed. Enemies – whatever or whomever they were– remained unknown, and Dru was too exhausted to rely on nuanced tact.

“Milius, do you have a bearing?” Dru asked the expedition’s guide.

Staring about like a blind man, he tried to ‘see’ the way beyond the white flats to the archipelagos of The Rip with his entombed eyeball. He tapped the black sphere with his knife tip, as if to coax some circuitry within. With his right hand, he pointed into the distance.

“There, I think. In the direction of that ‘grove’.”

Dru lifted her sun goggles and squinted, nothing but haze below the silver of the near zenith sun. “I don’t see it.”

“It’s there. There’s a blur just to the left of The Nexus, a distortion. It means there’s a ‘grove’ nearby.”

Whatever Milius saw in the virtual world of his ocular disfigurement was known only to him. She could only reconstruct the images from his abstract descriptions so much, even after all these weeks. With the sun now higher in the sky, taking bearings was unreliable. More and more, she had to rely on Milius and his organic compass.

“If you say so,” Dru replied.

“I’m almost certain.”

“Pack the rest up into the other satchels and rucksacks,” she shouted back to Hadrian and Roman, standing next to the remaining two isopods.

As they marched with a steady rhythm, Dru took stock of their reserves. They'd enough dried provisions for a few more weeks, and if their filters didn’t sour, enough capacity to desalinate water for longer. The radio ran on solar-charged salt batteries, but they were beginning to corrode. They’d lost contact with the last Vespera two-way repeater about a week ago and the static grew worse by the wake. Her vest pockets held a few pistol cartridges of ammunition, and her bandolier had a handful of rifle bullets, but she hadn’t fired a shot since the swamp latitudes. The medical kit was where things were bad, however.

Most of the first aid gear including bandages, anti-coagulants, tourniquets, and sutures had been used up.

Antibiotics and fever pills were nearly gone, but the sterility of the polar latitudes had subdued most wilderness disease. Somewhere on their journey, they'd lost the kit full of most of their hot weather gear. What remained was a paltry assortment of zinc skin paste, electrolyte tubes, and chemically activated coolant packs. Surviving the heat was more behavioral than anything, as Dru's sister Ava would say, but it unnerved her. Then there was the obvious problem of having their medic Cato succumb to body rot during their swamp crossing. His handbook, a small bag of doctor's equipment, and pilfered pharmaceuticals was all that remained. Margins of error were thin.

"How far, Milius?" Dru asked.

Milius only shrugged.

"There!" Roman the radioman hollered.

A cluster of salt stalagmites popped up on the horizon.

"Salt angels."

An encouraging sign. The paper-thin creatures were like dowsing rods on the saline plains of Sinister's sunward pole, a sign of accessible water. Their lifecycle wasn't well understood as they were migratory creatures. It was known however that they traveled towards the heat of the Salis Majora to mate and die.

As the team approached the crystal spires, three salt angels sat perched. Their wings were folded tightly against their frail

bodies, multifaceted eyes stared at nothing and everything all at once. Dru walked up to the creatures and touched the largest male with the tip of her knife. Its four translucent petal-shaped wings extended. Backlit by the sun, they created a dappled display on the ground beneath. Wind barely blew in the far reaches of the Salis Majora, but never-the-less, an anemic breeze came up and disintegrated the creature, reducing it to nothing more than a pair of claw stubs.

“Gone to seed,” said Milius.

“There’s brine below. Look,” Dru said, tapping her foot on the translucent crust. “Roman, bring the pike.”

The young radioman unbuckled a metal pole from the isopod’s saddle and brought it forward. Roman always did what she asked him, never a protest. Sheathing her knife, she grabbed the pike and made swift thrusts into the ground. Chips turned into cracks as gurgling saline spilled out at her feet. Hadrian, the expedition’s gruff and grayed scientist, brought the desalination bags forward, unfurled them, and began working the pumps to inflate and draw the saltwater into the catch basin. Water purification was a task previously performed by their survivalist, Dru’s older sister Ava, who’d perished in the fluvial swamps during the ‘attack.’ Oddly, Dru missed her disparagements and barked orders. Ava had a certitude that gave

everyone confidence.

“It shouldn't take long. The polar sun will make quick work.”

“Good,” Dru replied. “We need to find some shade.” She looked at Milius, on his knees now in one of his meditative states. “Do you still see them?”

“Yes,” Milius replied quietly, ”another hour’s walk.”

“You sure?”

Milius nodded.

Hadrian shook his head in frustration, never trusting Milius’s version of certainty.

The isopods, native to the fluvial borderlands of the Salis Majora, crawled towards another puddle Dru had made for them and began siphoning brine with their proboscis. A network of organs filtered salts and minerals which they then expelled as a slime trail.

After twenty minutes, beads of condensation dripped down the sides of the sunstill and into its catch pockets. Dru emptied the water into their canvas canteen filters, squeezed until each were full. Hot as tea and musty, the water always made Dru’s throat clench. In a land of perpetual heat and no refrigeration, cooled beverages were a forgotten luxury. After the isopods had their fill, the radioman goaded the beasts onward into the heat. Dru grabbed a rein to lead them.

“How long will they last?” Dru asked the scientist.

“Not sure,” Hadrian replied. “I stopped seeing their residue about a week ago, and I saw the remains of a younger one near our camp when Roman last made radio contact. But nothing since,” he paused, “we may have hit their upper latitudes. The one back there,” he nodded in the direction of the recently deceased, ”most likely died of hyperthermia. It was breathing hard toward the end, ejecting this green sputum. Now, we’ve overburdened the others. But they may be stronger, younger. I don’t know.”

Dru sighed as they trudged on. She nodded at Milius. “He doesn’t know how much further until the Nexus, inside that eyeball of his. It’s nebulous. He knows it irks us, so…”

“—I’m not sure I understand,” Hadrian huffed. “What’re you trying to say?”

“Milius is telling us what we want to hear. The Nexus may be further, a lot further, and we’re now well beyond the point of rescue.”

Hadrian looked up and into the ever present sun as Dru walked on ahead. “What about the beacon?” he shouted.

“What about it?” she shouted back, continuing.

The beacon was a high powered one-time use radio transmitter tuned to the same frequency as their squawk. Through Vespera’s network of repeaters, in theory they could be located, but

sending a recovery team would take weeks. In reality, the beacon was a means for Vespera to locate the logs and journals if they died. The logistics of rescue this far out was impossible. With the expedition so poorly funded, there were serious doubts if anyone would even bother.

Dru jogged ahead to catch up with Milius. The journey had aged him most of all. Gone was his middle-aged pudge. He was lean now, almost gaunt, a square jawline emerging from his receding jowls. Milius was a sickly man at the expedition's beginning – dry cough, a red watery eye, stomach issues. However, he seemed cured now, physically hardened by their ordeal. A civil engineer and a quiet recluse in his former life, he'd never asked for this. But struck down by The Rip, Novum Pax gave him no choice. When Vespera had collectively awakened that fateful hour, it wasn't just the landscapes that had changed, but Milius's body as well.

His left eye was entombed by a miniature version of the larger pitch black featureless spheres that riddled Novum Pax and Vespera's municipal regions like a froth, embedding themselves in trees, rocks, soil, buildings, and in Milius himself. The orbs were collectively called 'The Rip' and sat mostly suspended in mid-air like a forest of near-reflectionless black. Even in the glinted sunlight of Sinister's twilight regions, they'd nary

a reflection. The Rip spread across Sinister like a vast archipelago, patches of suspended spheres as far as anyone could report. Some zones were relatively empty while others were so thick, the orbs merged into each other. Vespera's scientist found the anomalies impenetrable by all mechanical and electrical means. Where they came from, or what they were, no one knew. That was until Milius, and his affliction, were discovered.

"Is it brighter now?" Dru asked.

"A little. The Nexus is distorted by the nearby clusters. They're close; I know it. The dazzle fades a little. Sometimes I barely see it at all, like it's underwater in a slow moving shimmer."

Milius always struggled to describe his bearings. Maybe because everything he perceived was changing. Dru tried to give him grace, masking her frustration in order to not discourage him. In the wastes of The Salis Majora, a demoralized and fragile Milius would be the final blow for their ill-fated expedition. He slowed and opened his mouth in silent murmur, then pointed off to his left.

"Over there," he paused. "I think…"

Dru pumped her fist to signal everyone to stop. She walked back to the lead isopod, pulled a set of binoculars from a

saddle bag, climbed atop the beast and peered into the distance. Within a mirage she saw it, a tiny row of black bubbles. A cluster. If they kept their pace, they could be there within an hour. Dru couldn't remember the last time they'd camped.

"What time is it?" Roman asked.

"Does it matter?" Hadrian mumbled.

"Yes it does. There's a timed high burst synchronization squawk from Novum Pax's meteorological institute. It might help me to triangulate"

"Fine." Hadrian sighed and gazed down at the worn face of his wristwatch. "It's twenty six o'two. It's very very late."

"Two more hours then. We'll need to stop."

The isopods made gurgling noises as they caught sight of the groves of orbs. The Rip was extensive here, an island chain of hovering black spheres. The isopods were no doubt starving. The subsurface brine fleas and algae they fed on was scant this far into the heat. Their physiology was mysterious, however their docile nature and ease of coaxing made them simple to tame and use.

The first orb island came into full view. Their stagger turned into a march with the promise of shade. Once under the shadows, the four fell to their knees and rolled onto their backs. Staring skyward, they were greeted with the invigorating cool of

pure blackness.

Dru took off her sun goggles and gazed into the featureless spheres above. Her eyes dilated, turning the desert beyond into a blinding sheet of white. As she lay still, she heard the skittering multitudes of nearby isopod feet. She sat up and watched the beasts scrape and scrounge at the ground. Dru grabbed the pike and stabbed the salt crust underfoot. Brine spurted onto the surface. Small bits of purple and a few lethargic brine fleas flopped about. The second isopod shoved its mate aside and began to feed on the upwelling.

“The darkness allows the desert life to grow. Like reverse sunlight,” Hadrian mentioned. “This desert’s not static. Its crust shifts tectonically, a geophysical mosaic. Nascent algae deep below could have been at seed for a thousand years. Just a slight change in temperature and…” he paused,” life eternal.” He glanced at the grazing isopods. “Beautiful,” he said with a sardonic grin.

Maybe the beasts would survive a little longer. They went about setting up camp. Roman pulled his electronics gear from an isopod satchel and rigged the solar cells to charge the batteries. He complained about increasing corrosion, but somehow maintained a burnished optimism. When Dru doubted their prospects after the ‘attack’, and whether they should continue,

Roman was sullen. To the radioman, The Rip wasn't doom, but something else. To Roman, The Nexus journey was a pilgrimage for reasons he couldn't verbalize.

Hadrian set up his cot and slumped down on it, staring at his geo-physics gear, mustering the will to set it up. Dru looked him over. He was physically withered, more so now, but mentally, he remained impervious to the rigors of their collective ordeal. Legs bruised and wobbly, hands shaky, brow warped with wrinkles, sinew and bones buckled under a brain that possessed him like a wraith. Hadrian was duty-bound to record the environmental metrics of their long slow demise, almost beyond reason. The reality of his aging physiology he ignored; Dru often had to remind him to drink.

"Maybe not this wake, eh? Leave it for now," Dru said. "I doubt much has changed since earlier."

"Can't. I noticed a 'walking' of the compass needle at the last camp, spiraling… I'm trying to map it. We should be outside the node."

Dru shrugged then started to take stock of their dried provisions and water filters. Even after desalination, water could contaminate within the canvas canteens, something Ava taught her. Bad water would make them more vulnerable. She checked her weapons, a semi-automatic pistol, a rifle with a

telescopic sight, five mostly empty magazines, and a tripod. With the clip and the rifle rounds left on her bandolier, she had seventeen shots remaining.

“Didn’t really come in handy in the swamps, did they?” Hadrian mused, watching Dru.

“No,” she replied, sliding the bolt and checking the action then holstering the weapon.

“You shouldn’t feel guilty about the attack, you know.”

“I don’t.”

“You’re sister, she—”

Dru got up and walked away before he could finish.

Milius had spread his mat out and was now sitting cross-legged in a meditative pose. Unlike the others, Milius kept his graying features high-and-tight, hair sheared and cropped, face smooth, a laborious habit under the current circumstances. Dru could only assume he was compensating for his deformity. She often saw him touch the orb, as if to convince himself it was still there, as if it might have disappeared.

“Do you see it now?”

“Yes,” Milius replied. He pointed below the horizon. “But it’s murky,” he said, looking up at the orbs floating overhead. “There’s a texture to them when I focus, tessellated patterns — hexagonal— that can only be seen when properly reflected by The

Nexus. And they’re all different –the orbs– like human fingerprints.”

Milius’s left eye was a wonder. The sphere, like an alien parasite, had attached to his face and centered itself on his left socket. It was roughly the size of a human fist and gave him an insect-like appearance. The intersection of the orb’s hard edge with his flesh was seamless, the blackness like a liquid, submerging his orbital. Milius had said The Rip didn’t hurt but tugged at him. If not anchored in something solid, the larger the spheres, the more immovable. The smaller ‘foamy’ manifestations could be shoved about, but always returned to their origin when released. They were ruled by uncanny physics, and impossible to explain.

“Let’s get some rest, then we’ll continue when we’re sorted. We’re on borrowed time here.”

They set up their sleeping arrangements: cots and mesh tents spaced out in a circle with their gear piled in the middle. Small foldable fans, powered by solar batteries, kept the air moving across them. Dru undressed, slid onto her cot, and pulled the flap down. Setting her pistol under the cot, she rolled to her side and watched Hadrian set up his tiny weather station. With eyelids growing heaving, she listened to him announce the readlings as he measured them.

“Thirty four centigrade ambient. No change since last reading. Wind speed zero-point-two kilometers per hour. Barometric pressure at five-point-’o-nine pounds per square inch -the lowest yet! The air at this latitude is thinning from atmospheric drift, but the solar radiation has increased to twelve hundred and thirty two watts per meter,” he said, fidgeting with the solarimeter next to him. “It’s offsetting the reduced air density to keep things hot.”

Hadrian’s mumblings masked the constant ringing in Dru’s ears, and she was soon asleep. Her dream colors grew more vivid. Abstract instances of nonexistent colors bled into swirls as people, familiar yet alien, spoke to her in a nothing language. The heat stirred her subconscious. Once awake, the dreams evaporated. Her rest was cut short by the racket of Roman’s longwave radio.

“I got it,” Roman said with a smile. “A bounce off the ionosphere, or what’s left of it.”

Milius was asleep on his cot, but Hadrian had stirred. Rubbing the sleep from his face, he wandered over and squatted next to the radioman. Roman grabbed a notebook, ready to write. A series of beeps, varying in tone and length burst over the static. He wrote the code down in dots and dashes while marking the time stamps. A second signal burst filled the tinny speaker. Then

another.

“That’s all three beacons,” Roman said at last. “Now that I know which is which, now I need to combine the recordings in quadrature.”

He wrote more notes on his tablet while glaring back and forth at the radio’s panel of gauges and meters. Then after a pause, he grabbed another satchel and pulled out a folded map.

“There,” he said, marking the sun-bleached canvas with his pencil. “Seventy-two point two and fifty three seconds sunward. From triangulation, I’d say we’re two hundred kilometers away from the Tajigo Meridian.”

“This far and we’re already starting to see oxygen partial pressures drop. If this keeps up, we’re going to have a hard time without the enrichers,” Hadrian said, looking at Dru.

Intended to admonish, Dru dismissed Hadriane’s attempt to guilt her. When the first isopod had died, as the de-facto leader, she’d decided to dump the oxygen canisters and respirator masks. If such things were needed, the gear wouldn’t last long. They’d be forced to turn back. Regardless, by her estimate, the Nexus was closer, not farther, despite her doubts. Such gear wouldn’t be needed.

“It’s still a ways away, but we’ll be there before all that.”

“You should hope so,” Hadrian smirked. “If it's not the

thinner air, the sun will do us in. Less atmosphere means more radiation. And we're nearly out of zinc oxide."

"I'm not worried," Dru reiterated.

"By estimates, The Nexus and the sunward pole are nearly coincident, separated by a few hundred kilometers, barely any air volume, and—"

"—Enough!" Dru shouted.

She knew all of this and didn't need Hadrian's pedantic derision. An accomplished geophysicist, his scientific work had focused on Sinister's sunward magnetic fields. However, due to his 'polarizing personality' —as his department chairman punned— no students or collaborators could tolerate him. Despite The Rip's inert nature, the phenomena had grafted a small but measurable 'node structure' into the planet's fields, which Hadrian had discovered. With no one else able-bodied, the institute sponsored his sabbatical, despite his age. Of mutual benefit, Hadrian could finally explore a realm he longed to research, while his colleagues were mercifully relieved of his presence, with many of them hoping it would no doubt be forever.

She stood behind Roman to look over his map. "What's all that up there?"

"Up where?"

"Beyond the seventy fifth latitude. There's a lot of detail

there. I thought it hadn’t been explored. Who mapped it?”

Roman shook his head. “It’s just speculation based on Tigan hearsay.”

Dru kneeled for a closer look. The map’s high solar region was filled with whimsical features like dune seas, crystal mountains, and canyon rifts filled with snaking lochs. Someone had one hell of an imagination, a gimmick to entice would-be explorers into Sinister’s uncharted realms.

“Apparently Tajigo attempted high altitude mapping of the solar pole using a hydrogen balloon via a slow air current drift; aircraft never had the fuel nor the lift. The balloon was kitted with an automated camera,” Roman explained,” but no one recovered the photographs. So Urbo inferred a lot of it. ”

“Junk science. Tajigo nonsense,” Hadrian muttered. “Bayesian geography, ‘intertopology’ –or whatever ‘Urbo Scienca’ called it – is just so much Tigan delusion, a fake discipline. You can only blame the fallibility of their translations so much,” he huffed. “Their polar science is nonsense. My whole department thought as much.”

“Taking it rather personally, aren’t we Hadrian?” Dru said, taken aback by the scientist’s animus.

“Those Tigan frauds are an offense,” he smeared. “They give the post-Schism enlightenment a bad name.”

Dru shook her head, stood up and scanned the horizon.

“—Salt angels!” Milius hollered, pointing.

In the distance, shapes moved. Slowly, the four approached the fluttering beings. The Rip opened up like a forest glade where salt angels had collected. Within the glade was a large aquamarine pool, an oasis, one of the Salis Majora’s fresh water springs. Along the far shore stood clumps of salt stalactites amongst the spheres. Dru counted five in total, all fluttering about readying to perch.

“Come to lay their eggs here,” Hadrian said. “The last of the migration.”

Hovering near the mineralized pillars, the angels waited to land when the soft crack broke the quiet. One of the five exploded in visceral confetti. Dru drew her pistol and scanned the lakeshore for movement. The black orbs and salt-white made it impossible to spot shapes. The surviving angels quickly scattered, their wings buzzing with a speed Dru thought impossible.

She motioned for everyone to squat and wait, her eyes fixed on the disintegrated remains.

“What’s going on?” Roman whispered.

Dru shushed him.

Minutes later, human shapes appeared from behind one of the

larger spheres. Two men were dressed in jumpsuits stained with filth. Dru squinted for a better look and noticed their distinctive complexion and bleached hair.

"Tigans," she whispered. "They have a crude salt-shot pistol. A flare-gun thing."

"Tajigo? What are they doing here?"

Dru shrugged.

The Tigans moved on the angel's remains, diving in and tearing bite-sized flesh free from the carcass.

"By the high priests of Capricorn, they're eating them."

Tigans were tall and thin by nature. But these two were starving and had been for awhile. To eat a salt angle was an extreme act, to do so defied superstition. Because they'd adapted to survive –at least for a while– this far into the Salis Majora, the creatures possessed a unique physiology.

Their bodies were water-poor, and as a result their flesh was a desiccated wonder. An adaptation for flight as well as desert survival, their dryness made for extraordinarily bad eating. You could squeeze their flesh and organs and nary a drop of blood, mucus, water… nothing. To partake, these two must have been at their ends. Dru stepped out and signaled.

"What are you doing?" Hadrian grabbed her arm to hold her back. "They could be dangerous."

“They’re not cannibals, Hadrian.”

“Not yet.”

CHAPTER TWO: THE OASIS

The two men had survived a dehydration event, the last remnants of a larger group, the details of which were unclear. Without water, and on the move for a week, they'd mercifully found the oasis. Dru's immigrant mother spoke High Esperanto in the home, and as such, she managed to stitch their story together from their grunts and half sentences. Because Vespan New Latin was a creole of High Esperanto, Hadrian, Milius, and Roman caught the occasional word, but the Tigans' dialect was too thick, leaving Dru the 'de facto' interpreter.

Once she'd fed them rehydrated packets of legumes, the two settled down. They were in a maddened state, and Dru suspected they'd drunk brine, even though they wouldn't admit it. But having nearly drowned on oasis water, they'd made themselves sick. All the water had corrupted their brain chemistry, and they'd used it as an excuse for their famished depravity. No one

blamed them under the circumstances.

Even though the Tigans didn’t speak New Latin, Hadrian was reluctant to speak around the two men. Instead he expressed his concerns with sighs, and crossed arms. Something about the duo he found immediately disconcerting, but for whatever reason, wouldn’t communicate it. His body language was obvious, suspicious eyes following their every move, his stance a nervous sway. Annoyed, Dru assumed it was supply related, and ‘yes’, they didn’t have enough food or filtration to take on these two; she knew that, but options were few.

Dru walked over to Milius who sat along the shore of the turquoise lake. She took off her boots and waded in up to her ankles, then sat down next to him. She wiggled her toes in the silicates. The water was strangely cool. The sensation felt foreign after all the weeks in the heat.

“The water, it’s strange…”

“Thirty three celsius,” Milius said, gazing into the aquamarine with his one good eye. “Hadrian’s measured it.”

Dru gazed off. Despite its serenity, she wasn’t compelled to wade out. The salt sweat stung, and her skin stuck to her clothes, the idea was tempting. However, she worried a refreshing swim would somehow distract her from the pressing matters at hand.

“Are you ever resentful, Milius?”

He shook his head. “Why would I be?”

“The expedition was volunteers, but you were conscripted. It should make you indignant, especially now, with this mess we’re in.”

She still had the commission letter tucked into her rucksack, stamped and signed by the Vespan premiership of Novum Pax authorizing Milius’s service into the sunward scientific expedition. It allowed her to legally restrain him if he tried to abandon the mission.

Milius shook his head. “I’m not resentful. I’d little choice. With my eye, I felt I needed to do something. Better to be proactive, I figured.”

Dru nodded.

“I suppose if this would’ve happened when I was young, but not now,” Milius continued. “Resentment is bad energy; that’s what my psychologist would tell me. You can’t help what you have no control over. But occasionally, I still need convincing.”

Dru remembered mention of childhood trauma in Milius’s confidential dossier, but the specifics of which she’d either not remembered nor read. Ava discouraged gossip —not wanting to make Milius suspicious— and to avoid a squabble with her sister, Dru complied. However, she’d overheard Cato and Marcus

whispering about a ‘unique case’ of an odd psychosis. Dru didn’t want to expose Milius –they needed him– but now she was curious.

“What happened when you were younger?” Dru asked, knowingly.

Milius paused, his one eye transfixed on the water’s turquoise shimmer. “My sister and I were chronically ill. Our mother kept us home. We missed out on all the typical childhood things. We didn’t have friends growing up, which made everything hard.”

“I’m sorry.”

He shrugged. “The worst part was the physicians fussing over us, carrying on about every little symptom and endless dead-end diagnoses. Poked and prodded, scan after scan… At times, I just thought it was in my head, a figment, a delusion. Any little quirk of physiology I questioned, complete paranoia.”

“What made you sick?” Drua asked, letting the question hang in the air.

Milius sighed. “It was a complicated diagnosis, a long story. But in the end, compounding infections resulted in a ‘failure to thrive’.”

“Was it genetic? You mentioned your sister,” Dru asked probingly. The dossier was held in confidence, and Milius was unaware of its existence. Despite the state of the expedition, Dru kept the secret; she’d signed a contract under penalty. However, in the lawless lands of the Salis Majora, its legality

felt absurd.

“Genetic in a way, I suppose,” Milius answered, his head slung.

“Are you still ‘ill’?”

“I’m in remission, but it’s a process. But then this happened,” Milius said, tapping the black orb lodged in his head.

“That’s an easy one to diagnose. An undeniable malady. No figment.”

“Except this permanent hallucination —this astral vision…” Milius said, tapping his eye’s obsidian.

“No one doubts The Nexus, Milius.”

“Maybe, but the ambiguity gets to me —gets to all of us,” he said, gesturing to Hadrian and his frustrations with Milius's wayfinding.

“Cursed and blessed.”

“I’d like to believe it's a random circumstance. Thinking it might be something else gets all very…” Milius struggled to find the words.

“Needlessly philosophical?”

“I was thinking dangerously prophetic,” Milius smiled.

Dru nodded. “But in a way, the cosmos chose you, didn’t it? A one-in-a-million chance. Even if it happened for no reason,

you’re still its emissary. Good. Bad. Indifferent.

“The cosmos can’t be trusted,” Milius winked.

When The Rip broke out across Sinister, the orbs were indiscriminate. Miraculously, only two cases in Vespera were reported of spheres materializing in human beings. One had been an elderly man with a rather sizable orb lodged in his leg near the knee. Awkwardly big, it left him hobbled. Rapid enfeeblement of the affected area added to the man’s plight. Eventually a gangrenous zone had spread from the sphere over his calf and shin. With no way to access the wound, the infection couldn’t be treated. By the time surgeons decided to amputate his leg, the man died. The other victim was Milius, despite his emphatic protests that he wasn’t a ‘victim’ at all.

“You might not think of yourself as a victim, but you’re still The Rip’s hostage. You can make peace with it, but this wouldn’t have been your first choice, I’m sure,” Dru said.

“Making peace is a necessary component of fate,” Milius offered. “Attempting normality was pointless. The Nexus isn’t a disability, it’s something else.”

Dru thought of her tinnitus, the constant ringing in her ears she’d been plagued with since she’d suffered a headblow as an adolescent, delivered by her sister Ava. Maddening at first, she’d made peace with it eventually. But she could never ignore

it; silence was alien, and quiet was intangible.

“But you had a shadowside office on the top floor of the Alta on the Umbra, a technocrat with cache, a Masonic fellow. Didn’t you win an award?”

“Oscillating Vineyards, the reason we have ancient varietals - the reason the Bacchus District exists,” Milius smiled. “I’d like to think my agricultural work heralded a new era of Vespan alcoholism.”

Dru laughed. “But then you got stuck with a bunch of outcasts, searchers, and stowaways –us misfit nomads.”

“I had no family, no partner. I was comfortable, sure, but a neurotic. If I woke up with a strange tightness in my ribs, or a tingling in my hand, an inexplicable fatigue, it ruined my day.” He shook his head. ”I needed an out.”

“I don’t understand.”

“Routine is an addictive drug.”

“Not really a bad drug,” Dru mused, dipping a linen shirt into the water and tying it loosely over the top of her head. She fumbled for a cigarette from her ration pack and lit it. She offered one to Milius who politely refused.

It wasn’t as if she didn’t understand what he was trying to tell her; she did, but generational differences remained. She genuinely liked Milius, even though Ava was ambivalent. But that

was the best anyone could hope for when dealing with her single-minded sister.

“So you enjoy all this misery?”

He shook his head with a grin. “No,” he paused. “But misery is a state of mind. Some seek out tolerable misery: saunas, ice baths, all that, the shock of it, the endorphins and the relief.”

“I’d give anything for an ice bath.” Dru adjusted the brim of her sun hat and swished her feet around in the tepid lake water. “I guess this’ll have to do.”

“I remember trekking shadow-ward as a volunteer to service weather stations for the scientific institute. A couple of weeks in, beyond mists and moss forests, where the valleys narrow into cirques at the ice frontier, the trails grew steep. Higher up, I broke free of the fog and I could see for miles across the mountain tops. If I was lucky, I’d catch Luna Secunda –the second moon– in the purple liminal of Sinister’s shadow. If you gazed long enough you could see a handful of stars. And the cold… The cold I miss most of all. So hot here.”

Dru slid her feet further into the pool trying to tease out the memory of cold. Like describing color to the blind, it no longer had meaning.

“You’re doing well leading us, Dru,” Milius continued.

A laugh escaped her. “No, Milius. I am not.”

“The attack… You gave clear instructions on what they were to do, but your sister didn’t listen. Don’t feel guilty.”

Dru shrugged.

“And I’m sorry for your loss. I liked Ava.”

“I didn’t count on them panicking.”

Milius shook his head. “It’s not your fault.”

“Ava was right. It wasn’t professional. It was an insurrection. She might have been my sister, but she was our survivalist and our leader. The institute made a mistake picking the both of us. They should’ve known better –Ava and I should’ve known better.”

“Sisters are fate –family is fate– in that you have no free will. And you and Ava… we wouldn’t have made it this far if it wasn’t for you both.”

Dru shook her head. When it came to her and Ava, Milius’s appeal to reason fell short. Growing up, nothing was rational, nothing made sense. “It wasn’t a shortcut and our weapons were useless. We should have turned back. We were in no shape to continue.”

“Time was critical. Returning, regrouping, and relaunching an expedition wasn’t possible.”

“That’s not necessarily true,” Dru said. “We could have

regrouped.”

“Perhaps, but my condition is deteriorating. My eye,” he again tapped the black orb, ”it’s starting to lose focus of the Nexus. Things are cloudier now.”

“Maybe it's macular degeneration or glaucoma. That can go on for years,” Dru speculated.

“I’m not elderly, but I’ll admit, this experience is quickly aging me. Also, I need the truth. I need to know why this happened.” He gestured at the multitude of black bubbles obscuring the featureless horizon.

“What if we get there and there’s nothing? It’s just more of this…”

“We have to get there first, don’t we?”

Dru didn’t answer. Instead she finished her cigarette and let the cool water drip down her face from the soaked shirt atop her head. They both gazed at the two Tigan men, sprawled in the circular shadow of a hovering orb. They looked dazed.

“Are they dangerous?” Milius asked.

“Their mere presence makes them dangerous. As for them specifically? I don’t know. They’re desperate.”

Reluctant to move away from the safety of the oasis, they were in no hurry, despite their dwindling provisions. From Milius’s impression, the orb archipelago continued on for kilometers,

branching and spreading out into more of a ‘savannah’ than the crowded ‘forests’ they’d previously traversed. Scouting beyond camp proved fruitless. The Rip’s spheres were larger and closer to the ground than in the lower latitudes. As such, they’d few options for marking waypoints under the orbs’ canopy. It was too much of a maze.

Besides the distortion corrupting Milius’s bearings, navigation still proved possible, however imprecise. Dru etched an arrow into the salt crust, just in case Milius grew more susceptible. Dru noticed ambiguities with Milius prior, and now was an opportunity to calibrate the drift. She’d query him in a few hours to see if anything had changed.

Beyond the packed orbs near the oasis was a narrow strip of salt dunes cutting a path through The Rip. The formation went on for kilometers. Softer than the salt pan near the shore, Delfino and Ludoviko –as the Tajigo men introduced themselves– slept in the comfort of the dunes. Dru, Roman, and Hadrian set up their cots and mesh tents closer to the water, letting the isopods graze nearby. The shade, along with the increased subsurface springs, made for rich isopod feeding.

After they’d rested and let their stomach’s settle, the Tigans grew more talkative, at least Delfino. Ludoviko said little, keeping to one word answers and head nods. Delfino was the

Tajigo expedition’s mapmaker, and as such, had a version of his own map similar to Roman’s. While some of the fanciful oddities were the same, swaths of The Rip had been penciled in. Tajigo’s scientists had sent up survey balloons with a photogrammetric telescope. Using hundreds of photographs, they stitched together a more complete map of The Rip up to, and slightly beyond the Tajigo meridian. Dru thought Hadrian would have more interest in Delfino’s version of the old Tigan map, but the scientist was aloof and cared little.

Dru, Milius, and Roman crowded around Delfino as he described The Rip’s geography, and Dru tried to translate ad hoc. Fractal spirals blossomed into blotchy random provinces. In between, dense sections were seas of open terrain with hardly an orb for kilometers. Such a zone was where Tajigo and its environs resided. A Tigan prospecting mission in search of rare-earth metals resulted in Urbo’s first physical evidence of The Rip. Without Vespan diplomatic communiques, The Rip wouldn’t have been believed in Tajigo’s capital city Urbo. Vespera had been hit hard, while Tajigo had been mostly spared.

“Your expedition and our expedition, how did we end up meeting in the same place?” Dru asked, suspicious. “The odds are a million to one.”

“A coincidence imaginably, but less of one than you might

think. Look," Delfino said, pointing back to his map. "We've analyzed the patterns and determined it's a type of chaotic geometry. But this Rip, as you Vespans call it, its patterns can be mathematically fit. Because our survey was limited by the thinning atmosphere at the higher latitudes, we projected The Rip towards the sunward pole. See this line here?" Delfino pointed to a sketch, an extrapolation of the sphere-clouds and their amorphous borderlands. The zone looked similar to a horn-shaped peninsula, narrowing to a point in the high solar reaches of the Salis Majora. "It just kind of explodes in a burst. There's a 'great attractor' —a node— where it's believed The Rip originated. You call it the Nexus. That's where he's taking you, isn't it?" Delfino said, nodding at Milius.

"I'm not following," Dru said, trying to process Delfino's technical High Esperanto. "Let me see if I can translate for Hadrian. This is his area."

Impossible to hide, Milius's presence and purpose were obvious to Deflino and Ludoviko. Dru avoided the specifics of Milius's condition and the mechanics of The Nexus that guided them. But it didn't take much to figure it out, despite the fact that the Tigans seemed conspicuously uninterested.

Dru said nothing, getting up to chat with Hadrian who was busy with his instruments.

“Our guests seem to have a few technical observations regarding The Rip. Being our expedition’s scientist and all, you might find it of interest,” Dru said. “I can translate, if you’d like.”

“Was he carrying on about all that ‘fractal’ nonsense?” Hadrian sniped, looking at Delfino out of the corner of his eyes. “Pattern morphology driven by randomly directed determinism, a bunch of drivel. The Rip is stochastic, it has no structure. Only Sinister itself gives it structure.”

Dru, taken aback, did a double take. “Hadrian, how did you know what Delfino was telling me?”

“—What?” Hadrian, acting confused, stammered to explain himself. “I mean… What else would he be going on about, pointing at that map of his. Everyone knows what Urbo’s been theorizing.”

“Who knows? I don’t know. None of our expedition knew. The institute sponsors didn’t know,” Dru said, surprised.

“It was on the Tigan academic wires. Urbo, Novum Pax have a shared database,” Hadrian blurted.

Hadrian was hiding something, but what, Dru didn’t have the time to suss out. Most likely, he was covering for a chink in his own logic. The notion was absurd, considering Dru and the others had little clue what he was talking about.

“Odd, don’t you think? None of this was in our briefings. We

could have used all the help we could get."

"You'd be better off sifting through bird entrails. Tajigo hasn't produced worthy science in a century."

"Fine, Hadrian. Suit yourself," Dru said, turning and walking away.

Despite Vespera and Tajigo being the sole states of Sinister, they were foreign and adversarial. Antipodal along the planet's liminal rim, commerce and communication were spartan. Dru's mother was Tigan, making her daughters more intimately aware of High Esperanto speakers than her Vespan countrymen. Tajigo was Vespera's mother country, and their separation was one of 'colonial independence', lacking amicability. As such, Vespans held Tajigo in suspicion.

Replenished from the oasis, both expeditions –Tigan and Vespan – remained in an unspoken limbo, a limbo very much on borrowed time. Delfino had a particular charm Dru found appealing. He was handsome despite his raggedy state. Ludoviko was another matter. Dru found herself sharing a cigarette with Delfino, indulging herself by conversing in High Esperanto. Because the other's were unable to eavesdrop, she found herself at ease speaking her mother's native tongue. Ava and Dru used to argue in Tigan to hide each other's pettiness, much to the other's frustration, but never out of sentiment.

“What happened to your companions?” she finally had the courage to ask.

Sitting next to her, Delfino paused and gazed into the aqua depths of the pool. He rubbed his sun-worn face and stroked his narrow beard. “It was unexpected. I’ve never seen anything like it,” he said at last. ”We became mad. I thought I was hallucinating, thoughts completely unmoored.”

Dru said little as Delfino told his story. Using their map to navigate, Tajigo sent an expedition to the sunward pole as well, looking for The Rip’s origin based on their observations and calculations. The territories of Tajigo, being more sunward, had less distance to traverse, but the badlands in between proved fraught. Beyond the palm forests, the ground heaved up, broken, wet, and full of endless mud.

To travel into the deserts and beyond the swamp latitudes, Delfino’s team used pelican ox. They walked upright on thin legs with massive webbed feet, better suited to negotiate the slop. Craned necks and vented beaks kept them cool in the overheated climate. Though they were not as capable of carrying heavy loads like the isopods, the oxen seemed optimal for the journey. They proved their worth in the fluvial regions, but once the Tigans reached the Salis Majora…

“Everything started to break down. The oxen became blind.

Their eyes grew puffy and started to turn milky. Soon they were unable to see. We tugged them onward as much as we could, no longer able to ride them. Once they started breaking through the crust into the brack, they refused to move at all. So," he paused, "we shot and butchered them, then continued on foot."

Following the transition along one of The Rip's major arms, the Tigans carried on into the desert, following their map as best they could. To proceed poleward, they needed to cross a vast crusted-over lake in a sphere-free expanse.

"No shade and all the gear on our backs with a few improvised sleds," Delfino described, taking another sip of spring water from a canvas canteen. He was drinking more water more often as he told his story. "I was with Johano near the lake's edge, he was an attache in charge of the expedition. I remember looking down and seeing more blue than white. Hexagonal tessellations broke up the surface. The crust had grown dangerously thin. A few moments later we heard the first scream."

Hadrian had tried to describe this hazard to Dru, but the physics were complicated. Sinister's Salis Majora was a shallow ocean fed by all the planet's rivers and streams. Atop was a thick crust, but below was a complicated slurry filled with salt-bergs pushed around by tidal force. Because of the shifting mass, static charge built up forming a geophysical battery full

of electrochemical potential. Walking across thinner zones, Dru remembered the crackle and shudders of discharge deep below. Certain areas were particularly unstable. The area Delfino described was one such place.

"I turned around and saw our logistician break through, flailing in the brine trying to pull himself free. Then another fell. And another. By the end of the chain reaction, two thirds of our team had plunged in. The brack was particularly hot and caustic, and as much as we shouted for them to stay calm, they couldn't; they were burning. Then came the first explosion.

"A lightning bolt hit, exploding like a geyser, engulfing the first, then the second, and then all of them. Blue flashes and foam, then the reek of ozone and char mixed with the odor of anoxic slime. When we got to them, most were dead. We managed to pull one man, our physician, onto the salt flow. His flesh was pink and his uniform had melted to his body. A massive burn extended from his boot to his right fingertip. The bolt had burst him open from within."

Delfino went on to describe the aftermath. Their desalination gear was lost, and only a faulty hand pump unit remained. Besides Delfino and Ludoviko, two other expedition members survived, their attaché Johano and a remnant of their science team, a biologist named Pacjo. Delfino poured over his maps and

survey logs looking for a landmark of safety. He'd determined from notes gathered by Tigan surveillance, that possible oases existed sunward, beyond the Tajigo Meridian. But it was a two week march with little shade from The Rip. Open desert, heat, with no guarantee of water. Pacjo explained humans could survive up to three wakes without water but only under optimal circumstances.

Dru didn't want to listen anymore. Describing their survival horror only amplified her anxiety. With the undeniable truth that she and her fellow Vespans were sure to perish in the saline wastes, ignoring the mechanics of their demise was 'bliss'. But listening to Delfino carry on… it grew unbearable.

She focused on the oasis' turquoise and the sphere's geometric purity in an attempt to mute Delfino. However, the details bled through: grotesque illness, excruciating madness, fatigue, thirst, and inhuman abandonment. Dru felt parched just listening. Topped with anecdotes of psychotic breaks and outbursts of violence, Dru finally interrupted.

"-Deflino. Stop please. I've heard enough. I'm sorry about your companions. But considering our current quandary, I'm not sure hearing this helps me," Dru explained, standing up to have an idle look about.

Delfino was quiet for a moment, then said, "No. I should

apologize. This heat, the sun… it confuses things."

"I need to go lay down."

She walked over near her camp and made for her tent shade and cot.

"What were you two talking about?" Hadrian asked as she walked by.

"Nothing. It doesn't matter," Dru said, feeling dizzy.

"It sounded like something. Did he give you any details about their journey, how they navigated, all that," Hadrian asked, looking over at the Tigans.

Dru shook her head.

"No compass, no radio, no transponder. It doesn't make any sense. The odds of this are extreme. The Salis Majora is just too big. Are you sure he didn't mention anything?"

"No."

"You know Tigan spycraft, maybe they were working from some intelligence. I can't just accept—"

"—I'm too tired to decrypt your insinuations, Hadrian. Leave it."

The scientist shrugged.

Dru pulled the shade mesh aside and crawled onto her cot. With the waves of exhaustion and low spirits, sleep came quickly. And with sleep, the dreams… intense as usual. Surrounded by

blackness, a lone sphere hovered in front of her. Unlike the orbs of The Rip, this sphere wasn't black but rainbow, like a soap bubble filled with smoke. Faces emerged then faded. Some she recognized, others were foreign. She reached out to touch the sphere but was shocked. The jolt delivered a lucid pain.

"Druscilla," the voice said in High Esperanto," wake up."

Quickly Dru reached for the pistol under her cot but found nothing. Sleep clinging to her eyes, her panicked hand swept the ground below looking for her weapon.

"Lost something?" the voice said again. Delfino.

"What's going on?" she said, sitting up in her cot and throwing back the flap of her sun-mesh tent. "Where is it?"

"Where's what?"

Delfino squatted outside and was smiling at her. His eyes were a bright blue like her mother's —a common trait among Tigans— and flickered in the reflections of the oasis pool. He reached over near her boots, just inside the tent flap, and grabbed her pistol by the barrel.

"Looking for this?" he said, handing it over to her.

She grabbed it from him and safed it in her folded holster belt. Confused, she looked around her tent. The remainder of her gear was as she remembered it.

"I always keep it under my cot. Why was it over there?" she

mumbled.

Delfino shrugged. “You were tired and forgot?”

“-But I-”

“-Come with me,” he said as he stood.

Once Dru got herself sorted and left the tent, she noticed the rest of the camp was asleep, no one on shift. Maybe it was the general safety of the oasis, or the addition of the Tigans, but she’d let their vigilance lapse.

She followed Delfino as he walked by a sleeping Ludoviko and headed into the maze of spheres. Dru soon realized where he was heading. But why, she didn’t know. The black orbs opened up into the path of low dunes that meandered like a river through The Rip.

“Where are we going?” Dru asked, stumbling through the awkward terrain as she struggled to keep up.

“Ludoviko and I came this way before the oasis.” He pointed at the ground. “You can see our footprints.”

Dru had a look and sure enough, she saw two sets of erratic footprints heading in the opposite direction.

“Delfino. We’re going to get ourselves lost.”

“This continues on for a kilometer or more like a road,” he said, walking ahead.

Dru stopped until Delfino turned around.

“You didn’t answer my question.”

“Ludoviko and I noticed a salt angel redd on our way to the oasis, but we were in no condition to harvest them,” he said. “I need your help to get at them.”

“We don’t need them,” she protested.

The thought of consuming any more sunward fauna churned her stomach. While Vespans were typically vegetarians, Tigans still had predilections for animal flesh. Tajigo was much less fertile. Dru recalled her mother’s stews from the old Tigan recipes that used to fill the house with the odor of offal. Because the meat was so rare in Novum Pax markets, she mercifully made it infrequently.

“We should have enough dried beans and legumes for you both,” she lied.

“If you haven't tried angel eggs, they’re an oddly delicious delicacy. If word got out back home, this whole place would be overrun,” he joked.

“Here,” she said, pulling her empty satchel from her shoulders and offering it to him. “Fill it up with the skeins. We won’t be partaking.”

“Come with me,” he said smiling. “I could use the company and besides, a weapons officer might be handy if there’s any spiders lurking about.”

“No one’s seen a salis arachnid in three centuries. Only fossils. They’re all extinct.”

“Perhaps.”

Dru hesitated. Delfino’s obvious flirtations —while not serious— were a welcome diversion. Any conversation outside immediate arguments over navigation, provisions, and water was an escape.

“Okay. I’ll come,” she said at last. “Let me go back and fill my canteen.”

CHAPTER THREE: THE REDD

They stuck to the shade, hugging the edge of the spheres that lined the natural road through The Rip. Their pace was slow. The hardened dunes made for challenging footing. With little wind this far sunward, Dru marveled at how long it must have taken the dunes to form.

Delfino was talkative, chattering about his life in Tajigo. Dru had never been. Her mother once made the journey home to Urbo, the capital, by herself when Dru’s grandfather had died. Despite being from Tajigo, her mother had a quiet disdain for her and her sister’s far off homeland. As such, she mentioned it little. Urbo was more hierarchical than Vespera and beholden to

the politics of Planetfall, with the officer class and defunct priesthood becoming the de facto politicians. Despite her family ties, Dru's mother had little interest in invigorating her daughters' heritage. She suspected her mother forced High Esperanto onto her and Ava out of convenience. Her mother's accent was thick, and she had little interest in refining her mastery of New Latin.

From what Dru gathered, Delfino was from an upper class family, ancillary to the Domos. The wealthy houses of Tajigo lived on the shadowside of its capital city. And his mention of a mountainside home with curated fungal gardens cued her into his pedigree. The poor of Tajigo lived on the sunward faces of its valleys and hills, hot and humid, close to vast snaking waterways and agricultural zones.

"Did you work for a geological survey back home?" Dru asked.

Delfino grinned. "Not as such. I came to it late. Quite late. I was trained in surveying for the expedition."

"Urbo's best and brightest, eh?" Dru joked. "Couldn't find any Tigan volunteers for your doomed mission?"

"No," Delfino replied flatly. A silence followed. Dru took note. She'd stumbled across something, but what, she wasn't sure.

"What did you do before?" Dru asked.

Delfino looked at his feet as he walked, lips pursed, searching for words, his mind at work. A moment passed, then he spoke. “I was an agent for the major houses –the Domos– a facilitator, some might say a negotiator.”

“Like a fixer?” Dru asked, the question loaded.

“I would say more of a contractor, a contractor with calculated risk,” Delfino replied, somewhat annoyed. “I don’t know what ‘fixer’ means in New Latin, Dru, but in Urbo it's a pejorative.”

“You could argue it has similar connotations in New Latin,” Dru said. “Look. Delfino, I don’t care. I don’t judge anyone. I was just curious. None of it matters anymore anyways.”

Delfino nodded, his face oddly sullen.

“If you didn’t volunteer, then how did you end up out here?”

“Essentially conscripted. My existing contracts were in jeopardy and I had money issues. This offered a way out,” Delfino replied. “And I’d been to university, so they figured I could learn geology and cartography.”

“Do you like the disciplines?”

“They’re interesting enough.”

They walked on through the miniature dunes. Dru wanted to ask more questions, but Deflino’s reticence cued her to avoid prying much further. She’d met other Tigans, but mostly from the

embassy. Other than her mother, she'd never met another Urbo plebeian. And Delfino, while attractive, had an exotic charm about him that enticed Druscilla.

"What's it like in Vespera?" Delfino asked, making conversation and breaking the awkward silence that'd accumulated.

"We have clouds and rain occasionally. It's cooler and there's forests and orchards."

"We have forests too."

Dru smirked and let out a laugh. "Palm trees aren't trees. They're plants."

"Defensive, aren't we?" Delfino goaded, smiling.

Vespans pride was in its unique climate, however localized to Sinister. Its latitudes were suited for forests, with seeds stored from The Crossing: pines, elms, oaks, and orchard trees from apples to almonds. Located at a crosspoints of Sinister's anemic atmospheric currents, rare rain clouds doused the cities in an occasional alien sheen of wet. With the rain came the intense smell only Vespans could appreciate.

They kept up their friendly comparative game until Dru noticed Delfino slowing and wincing from an undisclosed pain. He was sipping water more often. Dru finally stopped him.

"You're hurt."

“I’m okay.”

Dru took a look at him. Besides his disheveled appearance he was ambulatory enough. His tattered boots were fraying but not to the point of blistering his feet. He walked without a limp, no outward signs of joint pain. Then she noticed a bright red blotch just underneath his right armpit, staining his jumpsuit.

“You’re bleeding.”

“It’s no bother.”

“Let me take a look.”

Delfino let her. She slowly unzipped his loose fatigues. As she got closer to inspect the wound, she felt his eyes on her. As she helped him wiggle out from his sleeves, he let go a whimper.

“By the priests of Capricorn. What happened?” Dru exclaimed, stepping back.

With his upper body bare, Dru inspected the source of his excruciation. Claw marks extend from his shoulder to his waistline. Filthy bandages blotted out the worst of it, but a sizable stab wound had opened up just below his chest. The puncture was wide and bleeding.

“Why didn’t you let us look at this earlier? I’m surprised you’re not dead from infection.”

He shook his head.

“What did this do to you?”

“Would you believe me if I told you it was a salis arachnid?”

“Probably not, but anything’s possible,” Dru replied. The Salis Majora was ‘terra incognita’, and she was open to the possibility of roaming cryptids.

“The attack happened right after we lost most of our men. Ludoviko and I stumbled across one of their pit traps and-”

“-You didn’t mention any of this before.”

“I didn’t think you wanted to hear any more gratuitous details regarding our ordeal. You seemed put off.”

“That’s not true,” Dru protested. “If you’d mentioned a famed Lazurus cryptic, I would have paid attention.”

But it was true, and she had failed to conceal her discomfort. To explain herself was futile, her excuses poor. She reached into her satchel and retrieved her first aid kit.

“There’s not much here,” she said, rummaging through the pouches. ”But we can at least try to stop the bleeding.”

Dru broke a pack of disinfectant and wiped the wounds as clean as possible. Delfino let out a hiss from the sting.

“I’m sorry.”

The stab wound was pouring. She doused it with coagulant powder until the blood gurgled and slowed. After a minute, the bleeding stopped completely.

“It doesn't appear infected. At least not yet.” She stepped back to have a better look. “I’ll apply some antiseptic ointment to the main wound as a precaution.”

Delfino flashed a half-hearted smile.

“A salis arachnid did this to you?”

He nodded.

“By the priests of Capricorn, you’re telling the truth?”

He nodded again.

The stab wound was clean, unlike the claw marks surrounding it. She guessed it was the beast’s fangs. She asked Delfino, but he admitted the attack was a blur, and that it was Ludoviko who pulled him free from the pit trap then killed the creature.

“He tore it limb from limb, literally. The spider must have weighed a hundred kilos.”

“And no souvenir?” Dru winked.

He shook his head and grinned.

Dru started to bandage him up. He lifted his arms as she wrapped gauze around his midsection. She felt his closeness, his body heat, his breath on her scalp as she quietly finished taping him up. She lifted her head and looked into his eyes. Intending to look away, Deflino held her gaze. Too quick to rationalize a way out, Delfino leaned in and kissed her. Eyes closed, mouth engaged, time and consequence fell away. He

embraced her as she tried to be mindful of his wound. For an instant, she was no longer in the Salis Majora, no longer a survivor leading a doomed expedition. The sting in her eyes, the blisters on her feet, the salt-sting on her palms and knees disintegrated with the rush of oxytocin. A cool tingle relaxed her. He was gentle, and his taste was unexpected, not visceral or bloody, but clean and enticing.

What felt like minutes was nothing more than tens of seconds. Breaking the moment, she stepped back, folded up her kit, and slipped it back into her satchel.

“Sorry,” she said.

“For what?”

“Whatever that was.”

“What was it?”

“Not sure.”

They walked for another half-an-hour until the orbs widened to reveal an encrusted pond near a collection of salt pillars. Delfino pointed out a vermillion patch under a clump of suspended spheres. Dru looked around for the remains of salt angels but saw none. He asked for her survival knife. Dru unsheathed it and handed it to him. He shifted his grip and grabbed it like a pick.

Kneeling, he chipped the crust until a brackish pool formed.

Setting the blade aside, he reached into the brine and pulled out a skein of translucent eggs, each about the size of a thumb. Delfino pinched the skein until a gem-like egg squeezed out. He held it to the sun. The egg acted like a lens, focusing speckles of red light across his face.

“Come here. Have a look. Do you see it?”

Dru stood next to him and looked up. Inside the egg, she saw the shadow of an embryo.

“In a month the nymphs will hatch, break through the crust, and take flight duskward until it’s time to return, spawn, then die.” He quickly popped the egg into his mouth and chewed. “But not this one. Here, give it a try.”

He squeezed another from the skein and offered it to her. She refused, but Delfino insisted. Not wanting to offend, she quickly popped it in her mouth and chewed. A burst of tangy saline spilled over her tongue. She suppressed the urge to gag and quickly swallowed it whole. A bitter aftertaste followed as she fought a dry heave. She slurped water from her canteen to wash away the taste. Wiping her mouth, she caught Delfino laughing at her.

“It’s not funny.”

“You should have seen your face.”

“Those were disgusting.”

“More for me then.”

Dru was nonplussed and handed Delfino a cloth bag for his eggs. She didn’t find any of this amusing and felt Deflino’s charm dissipating like a spell. Not waiting, she turned and headed back towards camp. Delfino scrambled to collect the remaining skeins and jogged to catch up. She thought they may have been rotten, but with a taste so overpowering, she found it impossible to tell.

Delfino tried to engage her on the return, but only towards the end did she find enough digestive relief for idle conversation.

“I’m sorry,” Delfino apologized.

“It’s fine. My constitution should be tougher. At least that’s what Ava used to tell me.”

“Whose Ava?”

“My older sister. She was our survivalist.”

“And she died?”

Dru nodded.

“You mentioned an attack…”

Dru nodded again.

“You don’t talk about this attack much, do you?”

More nods.

Ava was the reason Dru had joined the expedition. Less than

two years apart, they were competitive growing up. Most of Dru's injuries were from Ava, a dislocated shoulder playing harpastum, a broken finger and a cracked rib while sparring in savate, the head blow that'd caused her ears' neverending ring. No one could recall why the rivalry existed, least of all their parents. When Ava had volunteered for the expedition, Dru had done so reflexively, without question. Ava's usual sibling rage and sabotage ensued, all of it useless, Dru would not be deterred. Both knew one wouldn't be leaving without the other.

Before The Rip, Ava trained Novum Pax's praetorians in the discipline of survivalism, in the event of another hypothetical 'schism' of Novum Pax's order, a breakdown of civil life. Dru's sister could eat anything, one of her talents. While not taboo, Vespans rarely ate flesh. Except Ava had taken to their Tigan mother's Urbo cooking, preferring the spongy flesh of an arachnid over a gold foiled salad of chrysanthemum and morel. Ava was skilled in wilderness survival, but Dru was a better martial artist.

"Again, I apologize. I should have realized salt angel eggs are an acquired taste."

"To say the least."

"How did you become the expedition's weapons officer?"

"Martial arts, tactics and strategy… I was an intramural

fencing champion.”

“Fencing? Swordplay and all that?”

Dru nodded. “It was something I just took to.”

“A bit impractical, isn’t it? Pre-Crossing nostalgia and revivalism, ceremony, drama…

“It’s not Krav Maga; I’ll admit, but I just had a talent. Most of it’s in your head, like chess, not so brute force, not so visceral. Size and weight doesn’t matter. Other attributes come into play. You research your opponent in situ. You expose their weaknesses over time. People become puzzles.”

“But you’ve no sword with you?” Delfino smiled.

“—Rapiers, Epees, Foils… they’re not ‘swords’,” Dru smirked. “Anyway, I’m not likely to find a worthy opponent out here.”

“Fair enough,” Delfino replied. “When did you pick up firearms?”

“My father was head of the guards for the Tigan embassy in Vespera, a praetorian contractor, a hired gun. That’s where he met my mother. He taught me everything I know about firearms. He said that to be a martial arts instructor, I needed to understand them, a necessary evil or whatever. We argued about that.”

“Why?”

“Relying on them makes you weak, undisciplined, thoughtless,

and lazy.”

“Perhaps.”

Dru nodded but said nothing. She could tell Delfino was thinking something.

“So, you were an instructor?”

She nodded. “Before I was recruited for the expedition, I taught at university—”

Two gunshots broke the humid air.

Confused, she looked at Delfino who said nothing, his face emotionless as he stared in the direction of the noise. Dru sprinted off and drew her pistol. She followed their footprints from before as she avoided colliding with the ubiquitous spheres. Emerging from the maze and into the oasis, she stumbled into a scene vastly different then the one from a few hours before.

Ludoviko had her long rifle, her bandoleer awkwardly hanging from his shoulders. The isopods lay dying a few meters away, several bullet holes piercing the flesh between a fading multitude of black eyes. Spasms rippled through their appendages, a last thrash before stillness. Hadrian, Roman, and Milius were on their knees in the center of the camp. Ludoviko had their hands tied behind their back.

Dru pointed her pistol at Ludoviko as she crept towards him.

Her breath and heartbeat quickened, mind reeling. She fumbled through all the plausible explanations, but the reality was obvious despite any remote possibility otherwise.

“What’s going on here?”

No one answered. Ludoviko grimaced as he pointed the rifle at her, his face beaded with sweat in the hazy sun. Taking hostages and looting in the polar region was thirsty work it seemed. The Vespans didn’t look roughed up, no doubt going along peacefully with the grim turn of events. Now in the proper light, Dru could finally appreciate Ludoviko for who he was: a taller, thicker and uglier analogue of Delfino. So much so, she pondered the possibility that they were brothers.

“Your father didn’t teach you well, or you completely forgot his lessons.”

Dru spun around to find Delfino had snuck up within a few meters of her.

“I’ll pull the trigger,” she threatened, pointing the pistol at his forehead.

“Go ahead.”

She went to fire a warning shot but felt the impotent click of a dry bolt. The clip had been unloaded. She pulled the trigger again in futility. A frantic pat of her webbing revealed she’d forgotten the extra cartridges in her tent.

“Give me the pistol Dru, or Ludoviko will pull the trigger. And his gun is loaded.”

“No,” she whispered.

“Please.” Delfino reached out for the weapon.

“No!” she screamed.

Tears welled as she dropped the gun and turned toward the blue of the oasis. As ordered by Delfino, she dropped to her knees and felt the cinch of a tie strip around her wrists. Delfino picked up the pistol and took a few steps back.

“I’m sorry, Dru. And I know how we were just starting to get along. But business is business, I’m afraid.”

“What business is that?”

“We have our mission orders, and we intend to follow them.”

She felt like a fool. So much so, she couldn’t face her companions. The shame of her failure during the attack – resulting in their current predicament– was compounding. Now this ridiculous infatuation with Delfino –so naive– was going to cost them everything.

“Ludoviko, grab him and let’s go.”

Ludoviko grabbed Milius, lifting him to his feet by the armpit. He handed Deflino Dru’s stolen pistol cartridges and a spare clip. He’d been busy in their absence, absconding with their supplies and provisions. He threw Deflino an overfilled

rucksack and heaved another one onto his back. The two Tigans were ready to set off for places unknown. However with Milius their hostage, the destination was obviously the Nexus. Milius groaned as Delfino threw a bulging satchel over his shoulders like a pack animal.

Dru struggled to her feet and started to follow. Delfino pointed the pistol –now loaded– at her, shifting the grip in his hand as if ready to use it.

“Don’t,” Delfino ordered, his face cold and drained of emotion. “Please.”

“You’re taking our food. You’re leaving us to die.”

They turned and walked away.

“You can’t take him!” she shouted.

“It’s okay, Druscilla,” Milius said, turning around. “It’ll be okay –I’ll be okay. Head shadoward. Go home.”

Ludoviko shoved Milius into the Rip’s obsidian maze. She paced about and moaned with impotence. Hadrian and Roman looked on in silence.

“I’m going after them,” Dru said, fumbling for her field knife as she tried to cut her bonds.

“Stop it, Dru,” Hadrian said. “We’re in no shape.”

“Help me cut ourselves free,” Dru said.

They managed to sever their wrist ties through an awkward

dance. Dru gripped her knife behind her back as Roman backed into her. He moved about, flexing his knees, pushing in the knife as he sawed away his restraints. Soon, they were free and nursing the red welts.

"I'm leaving."

"Stay put. They'll shoot you dead," Roman pleaded.

Dru seethed with rage. Pragmatic necessity ebbed into a background of emotional noise. She grabbed her knife from Roman and bounded off, following the three into the Rip's chaotic lattice of discrete black. The spheres enveloped her, muting the pleading shouts from her companions. She hastily followed their foot scuffs and bootprints, knocking into the orbs like an oncoming crowd. Her breathing hid sound, so she stopped briefly to catch her breath and listen. A clearing lay just beyond.

"We know you're following us, Dru. For your sake and your men, go back," Deflino shouted from someplace unseen.

She rounded a clump of spheres and heard a whine turn into a 'clack' as a bullet hit an orb next to her. The bullet ricocheted and hit another nearby sphere, entering its black diffuse surface. A ripple like a droplet expanded outward from the entry point. For a moment –a fraction of a second– nothing happened. Then the sphere spat the bullet back out onto the ground. Dru gazed at the metal fragment. Something wasn't right

about it, but she wasn't sure: shape, color, size —she couldn't place it.

"Dru! Go back! For the last time!" Delfino shouted.

She stepped out from behind the spheres and into the clearing. The three stood a hundred meters away. Milius was in between them, his head low, hands restrained. Ludoviko had the rifle aimed, ready to fire.

"You lied to me!" she shouted.

"I did no such thing!" Delfino shouted back.

"You betrayed my trust!"

"I'll admit, we did do that, but we didn't lie."

The Tigans pretended to know nothing about Milius's 'gift.' But it was a deception. Delfino never mentioned the freakish oddity, the fantastic artifact lodged in his head. No one had made a comment, conspicuously so. Their lack of curiosity was subterfuge; the ploy was obvious now. While Dru went to lengths to obfuscate Milius's uncanny bearings, in the end, it was unnecessary. Urbo and the Tigans were in possession of intelligence regarding Milius. The encounter wasn't a coincidence; it was planned. Milius was the target. Delfino's vague pencil drawn map was a ruse.

Ludoviko fired another warning shot, the report echoing through the spheres. The rifle bullet made a crater in the

hardpan a few meters in front of her. A puff of salt showered her with grit.

"The next shot will be the last," Delfino warned. "Now go back. And if we catch you following us again…" Delfino took her pistol and pushed it against Milius's temple.

Defeated, Dru backed away until she bumped into an orb. She looked down and saw the glint of the bullet near her feet. She reached down, grabbed it, then headed back to the oasis.

When she arrived, no one said anything. Hadrian squatted in the shallows of the pool, gazing despondently at the reflection of black shapes. Roman looked up, then went back to tinkering with his radio.

"If you squint just right, it's as if you're in the Lacuna District, paradise amongst the copra palms," Hadrian said at last. He turned around to look at her. "I see they were merciful enough to spare you so you could continue to grace our presence."

Dru said nothing, ignoring the slight. She looked around at the flotsam of their camp. Carrying everything in stolen spare rucksacks, the Tigans had left most of their gear. Unfortunately, most of it they could do without: unnecessary and ancillary instruments and hardware kitted for an expedition that no longer existed.

“They took about two thirds of our provisions and left us one desalination unit –the older one. We have one unused filter. They also took our sodium stove, which will make cooking the provisions we do have that much harder,” Roman explained. “But we have the spare rucksacks we were using as saddlebags.”

Dru did a quick inventory. The Tigans hadn’t been vandals, they left their equipment intact with the intention of allowing them to survive –for a while at least.

“But why did they kill the isopods?”

“From the mood of that beast Ludoviko, I’m thinking he was trying to deter us from following them. An unnecessary move; the man’s pathological. Cruelty I suspect was the reason,” Hadrian explained, dabbing his brow with a kerchief.

“Well, that’s not going to happen,” Dru snapped.

“What’s not going to happen?” Hadrian inquired.

“Deterring us,” Dru said, gazing at the mounds of inert isopod flesh.

Hadrian burst out in mocking laughter. “You’re joking! Maybe you haven’t taken full stock of our current situation, but your hormonally inspired excursion with the dashing Delfino has cost us. Delfino played you.”

“Stop, Hadrian.”

“How could you have been so foolish?” Hadrian seethed. “Tigans

are nothing more than rotten liars and deceivers. It's no wonder that side of Sinister languished, too busy stabbing each other in the back. Miserable lot."

"—Stop," Dru ordered. "—Stop it! I'm half Tigan, remember?"

"Well," Hadrian huffed, flipping his hands about. "I guess that explains a few things, doesn't it?"

"Pray tell, what does it explain?" Dru fumed.

Hadrian shook his head in contempt. "I'll leave it to your imagination."

"No. Why don't you oblige me," Dru snapped, desperate to keep her voice from shaking.

"You're susceptible, that's all. Mixed family, mixed race, mixed loyalties. You even speak their language."

"Do you honestly think I'm part of some Tigan masterplan to reach The Nexus? That I conspired with some Urbo cabal?"

"Unwittingly? That's been proven. Wittingly? That remains to be seen."

"Got to hell, Hadrian."

The scientist chuckled, looking skyward and gesturing to the landscape around him. "Too late, Druscilla. I'm already here."

"Hadrian, you're smart enough to know that if I was part of some conspiracy, I'd have a better mind than to let them leave me here with the likes of you."

The scientist said nothing, turning away.

Dru had had enough of Hadrian and joined Roman as he fiddled with his radio. She pulled out the sunward map from his satchel and unfolded it. Curious, Roman took notice and kneeled next to her as she poured over the grid, looking for a pattern in the noise of penciled datums Roman had used to determine their position. She followed their path out of the fluvial latitudes, beyond the vast glades of saltmarsh and into the Salis Majora's sunward reaches. At each of their camps, they'd marked their position, either via radio triangulation, solar sextant, or compass reading. Roman had drawn a dashed arrow poleward at each point. Borrowing Roman's pencil and using a tent stake for a straight edge, she extended the dashed arrows.

"Milius's bearings," Roman remarked.

"Most of that can't be trusted," Hadrian said, standing over both of them and pointing at the map with the stub of his forefinger. "Sinister's field anomalies are too weak, too erratic and chaotic here to take proper bearings using a magnetic compass. Some of those arrows could be twenty to thirty degrees off. Also, The Rip and all its nuanced electromagnetic peculiarities might have degraded those measurements even more."

Dru, still angry, ignored Hadrian as she extended the lines to a crossover point two hundred kilometers adjacent to the sunward

pole itself. She then drew an ellipse around the cluster of intersections.

"The Nexus?" Roman said.

Dru nodded.

The location measurements provided enough data to extrapolate to the Nexus; they'd had its position for a while but hadn't bothered to put it together until now. Instead, they'd relied on Milius's more convenient finger pointing.

"That's where you think it's at? And you trust Milius? It'd take him minutes of spinning about before he would finally point the way," Hadrian scoffed. "And half the time he'd change his mind and point us somewhere completely different with that monstrous eye of his."

"It averaged out," Dru said, snapping back. "And since he's the only one who can see the damned thing, we have to trust him."

"Look. Druscilla," Roman said, finger on the map. "The circle you drew, it's near the beginning of a rift, if I'm reading the map correctly."

"Now you believe in the whimsy of ancient Tigan map makers? All that fantastical scribbling is nonsense. You've said so yourself. Crystal mountain ranges, canyonlands, a network of open waterways," Hadrian said, crowding in and derisively

pointing at the cryptic topography on Roman’s map. “It's an absolute codswallop. The morphology of the sunward pole shouldn’t allow it.”

“It’s a landmark, if true,” Dru said to Roman, doing her best to tune out the old man’s rantings.

“If we stumble upon it, we’ll know we’re close to the Nexus, and most likely Milius.”

“Have you both lost your minds?” Hadrian spat, pacing about in disbelief. “And you Dru, of all the people who shouldn't trust Tigan mapmakers, I would think you would be more skeptical. You trusted Delfino and now he’s left us to die. Do you think his ancient predecessors, invoking ‘here be dragons’ rubbish on these maps, have any more integrity?”

Dru approached Hadrian. She was taller than him. Intimidated, he cowered as she stared into his green sun goggles. He took a few steps back, mouth agape.

“We’re going after Milius.”

“Suicide,” Hadrian scoffed.

“We’re already dead, Hadrian,” Dru argued back. “We were dead before Delfio and Ludoviko. If you look at this map, it’s a month and half trek back to the deltas and then a couple of hundred more kilometers until we reach a Vespan outpost. Too far. You’re already a corpse. Now, it’s just a matter of how you

fall into the grave.”

Dru had mentioned this fact for weeks, but nobody listened. She’d mentioned it every time they took inventory. But Hadrian had dismissed her quips as gallows humor. But now the scientist was in a slow mortal panic.

Hadrian existed within a divorced reality. He had a habit of both underestimating and overestimating a situation when it served him. Whether it was the dismissal of an injury, or an assumption that a full canteen should last three wakes, Hadrian’s catalog of callous remarks were a running joke. Dru found it infuriating. His family, no doubt, had found it more insufferable.

But the expedition had withered him, he couldn’t see it, not even in the reflections of the odd brine pools that dotted the salt desert. His hair went from gray to white, his pace was more a shuffle than a walk, and even his beard couldn’t hide his sunken cheeks. Putting on his boots, or reaching for his hat — even the most trivial exertion— prompted the odd groan. She tried to take pity on his failing physical state, but the scientist made sympathy impossible.

“It’s a puzzle, I suppose, our situation. And we’ll just have to figure it out,” he said calmly, a sliver of hope in his eyes.

Dru nodded. “Sure, Hadrian.”

“Yes, a puzzle,” he repeated, mumbling.

“We have two choices. We have ‘from whence we came’ and we have the unknown,” she said, pointing at the scraped mark where Milius had scrawled the direction of The Nexus. “We know the odds of one ——not very good— but we don't know the odds of the other.”

CHAPTER FOUR: THE BULLET

A wake from the oasis and Dru’s thirst for its cool water was all she could think about. Roman had taken over Ava’s survivalist duties and had found a more ‘effective’ way to butcher the isopods, much to Dru’s chagrin. Thin slices of their underbelly muscle, laid across a boulder-sized sphere, brined and salted, made an edible prosciutto. The rapid desiccation and curing would eliminate its problematic parasites, or so Roman thought. Her last meal of isopod had soured her stomach, causing heaves and dehydration. A condition she could ill afford.

They’d rigged up a sled using Milius’s cot, reinforcing its rod frame with tent poles and packing ties. They used two metal pikes, lashed to the cot to create runners. To drag it, they

configured their rucksacks as a harness, fastening the sled to the belt loops using straps. The whole sled weighed upward of thirty kilos. As such, they took turns dragging it.

Roman insisted they take his radio. As one of the few means for determining their location, Dru didn’t have an objection, other than its cumbersome load. However, Vespera’s beacons were growing weak, rapidly reducing the radio’s utility.

Gone were the mesh tents, too unwieldy and heavy, a risk if they were caught out beyond The Rip for any extended duration. With no shade, the zenith sun and thinning atmosphere would make quick work of them. As it was, their faces were caked with the cracked masks of dwindling zinc oxide.

Dru was surprised at what the thieves left behind. The Tigans' spoils were almost exclusively food, desalination equipment and weapons, in addition to a spare wilderness knife. They’d left Hadrian’s science equipment untouched along with most of the contents of their medical bag. Bandages were taken —doubtlessly for Delfino’s wounds— but the anti-parasitics and antibiotics were left behind. The medicine’s New Latin labels no doubt confused Ludoviko. And in a rush, he’d left it all not wanting to be bothered. Vespans suffered the sun worse than Tigans, and Milius was especially vulnerable. With no skin protection or burn gels, he wouldn’t last long.

Roman volunteered to be the first to tow the sled, and the going was slow. With no isopods the burden was on them, and without Milius, they stopped more often to find a heading. At camp Roman triangulated their location with his radio set. Unwieldy, he carried the unit in his rucksack to lighten the sled. Hadrian tried to read his compass, but Sinister's erratic polar fields caused the needle to spin endlessly, a fact he indubitably understood but couldn't stop lamenting. Dru attempted her solar sextant. This far poleward, however, meant any small angular error would knock them off course by tens of kilometers.

Making matters worse, The Rip expanded outward in their direction of travel. Not only did the monotonous black orbs become more dense, they grew larger. Gone were the 'savannahs' of the oasis. Now, the landscape was more of a 'jungle' canopy.

The Rip had always been a 'surface phenomena'. During the first months after its appearance, a survey team performed statistical measurements of its mean altitude. While spheres were discovered in lower reaches like mines, caves, and building superstructures, they were less common than those near the surface. Higher up on hills and mountains, the Rip's density diminished. Orb diameters ranged from fist size to that of orchard trees, intermingled seemingly at random. They were drawn

to their own gravity, clustering and collecting in groups. Some of the clumps were extensive, others spartan. Such trends, however, were opaque to the causal observer.

As they marched, the floor of the Salis Majora undulated over the course of kilometers. The terrain rose and fell from a maddening labyrinth of ground-level obstacles to a horizon of unobstructed salt flats speckled by the shadows of an endless dotted ceiling. With the zenith sun, The Rip shadows created a dizzying illusion, scrambling up and down. To counter it, Dru focused on her feet. As the kilometers wore on, the terrain's billows turned into cracks and ruptures in the salt crust.

"Tectonics," Hadrian explained. "The fluvial latitudes empty into the Salis Majora, the flows converge at the sunward pole in what I can only assume is a tidal heave of tremendous force."

"Maybe that's what we're seeing on my map," Roman said, referencing its fantastical polar topography.

Hadrian sneered at the suggestion. "Those Tigan scribbles? Codswallop. Nothing but the guesses of simpletons. The magnetic nodes' divergences show that what's on that canvas map would be utterly impossible."

The broken landscape was unevenly distributed. In stretches, the desert continued unbroken in its tiled salt pan. Elsewhere it mimicked the crevasses of shadow-ward glaciers but in

miniature. Traversing the broken ground demanded attention. Towing the sled was an ordeal. Each step invited the opportunity for a sprain, a lethal injury in their current situation.

“Do you see it?” Roman pointed. Taking his goggles off and squinting.

In the dotted shadows of the desert expanse, Roman noticed a patch of color amongst the bleached monochrome. A few hundred meters away, Dru grabbed her binoculars and zoomed in on the blotch, intermingled among the hemispherical shadows.

“Reddish… like a sienna,” Dru said, unsure.

“An odd color,” Hadrian said, grabbing for the binoculars as Dru handed them off. “It's not moving. I don’t think it’s alive.”

They cautiously approached the anomaly until they were certain it wasn’t dangerous. Closer, the mystery was revealed. Atop a plinth of salt crystal sat a clump of bloody dressings.

“Delfino. That wound of his…”

“It would seem our navigation skills are top notch,” Hadrian mused, callous to the visceral jetsam. “We’re right behind them. Another pint or two of blood and we’ll have caught up.”

The bandages were soaked. Delfino’s wound was more grievous than Dru had thought; the bleeding hadn’t stopped. She took a look about and noticed boot scuffs under a large orb hovering

nearby. She let her eyes adjust in its shadow and looked around.

"I found your rock hammer, Hadrian," she said, seeing the tool next to a hole of slowly seeping brine. "They must have used it to break the crust for water."

"I didn't know my hammer was missing," Hadrian said, stowing the lost item in his rucksack. "I haven't seen an actual rock in over a month." Hadrian squatted and dabbed his finger into the pool to have a taste. "Low salinity. Interesting," he said, smacking his lips. "There might be a spring underneath, not far below, a welling from the lower strata."

Dru pondered what had occurred in the spot a few wakes prior. Because Milius only spoke New Latin and Delfino and Ludoviko only spoke High Esperanto, she tried to imagine the gesticulation and argot they'd used to coax Milius into acting as their guide. New Latin had common roots with High Esperanto, but with distinct differences. Milius was at the whims of the armed Tigans. Dru feared they were under-feeding him and marching him too hard. He was frail to start.

Throughout, Milius had been the only one to offer encouragement to Dru, now the 'de facto' leader. He told her the attack wasn't her fault and had taken Dru's side over Ava's when it came to the fateful decision in the swamp. And Milius remembered Dru's instructions prior to the traverse, and how Ava

had ignored her.

Ava was gone, but the rivalry between them persisted, fiercer than ever. Loath to admit it, Dru's push into the scorching heat of the Salis Majora was fueled by spite steeped in pettiness. Somewhere in Sinister's vast fluvial swamp, Ava had been consumed and digested, and Dru needed to believe it was her sister's own doing. If Milius wanted to graft higher ideals to Dru's single-minded relentlessness, so be it.

They camped under the circle shadows and replenished their water. The sun quickly evaporated and condensed the brack inside the still bladder, turning it into potable water. They drank their fill and topped off their canteens. Eating isopod pemmican increased their thirst. So far the routine was sustainable. Dru had thankfully been saved from the nausea of past isopod meals. After an hour or two of restless dreams and abstract dread, Dru woke to find Roman and Hadrian already gathered and ready to set off.

The desert floor fell further away from The Rip's trunkless forest. To reach the smooth ebon shapes, Dru stretched tip-toed or hopped to touch them. Clouds of smaller spheres emerged in the space between the larger orbs. Like constellations, they assumed unique spatial patterns that evoked intended sculpture. The tinier spheres were smaller than any she'd remembered. She

jumped and grabbed one. Sensing its inertia, the mass tugged on her fist until she finally let go. After a moment —and under the influence of an unfelt gravity— the suspended marble drifted back in the direction of its origin.

"Up ahead," Roman said, interrupting the rhythm of their breath and the crunch of salt underfoot.

Roman pointed at a visual break in The Rip. Through her binoculars, Dru saw a hill a few hundred meters away. She zoomed in and saw that the hill wasn't a hill at all, but the base of a spire punching through the Rip's canopy. Partially concealed, Dru caught a glimpse of its peak through breaks in the clusters. The Salis Majora was endlessly flat, but this crag was an anomaly.

They diverted to inspect the landform. Closer in, the spire towered over them. The Rip partially consumed its base, orbs protruding from its surface. The far side had a gentler grade and a climbable slope. From the ground, Dru guessed the rise was fifty meters, maybe more.

"A salt-berg. You can see the upturned flows where it broke through. There's wet pockets in the cracks where the saline is drawn up. A lot of force down below."

"It's a different color," Roman observed.

Dru ran her hand over its vertical walls and took off her

goggles to inspect. The salts were a light red –or more pinkish– than the gray-white surrounding them. Veins of yellow with turquoise webbed out, following the cracks and crevices upward. Shards within glinted the sun, casting flecks of brightness onto the orbs nearby.

"Is it safe to climb?"

Dru unhooked the sled from her rucksack, grabbed a handhold and started up. It was solid enough, if one was careful and nimble. Deciding the view was worth the risk, Dru scaled the pinnacle. The climb took a quarter hour. Finding a ledge just below its pyramidal summit, Dru sat and let her feet dangle. She leaned back against the salt face, closed her eyes, and quickly realized this was the first time she'd properly sat in weeks. Chairs –even the collapsible variety– were not luxuries they'd bothered to bring into the wilderness.

With no shade, the sun was powerful, but a faint breeze picked up and teased a cool sensation on Dru's neck. She pulled her sun hat from her rucksack, reworked the brim, put it on, and gazed out over The Rip's topside expanse. The orbs littered the horizon like foam, stretching into the distance and fading into a haze. Waiting for the others to climb up, Dru scanned the distance with her binoculars. Far out, the hot updrafts churned a mirage. Despite its color, The Rip did not absorb or reradiate

solar energy. The inert spheres were always at the same temperature, completely adiabatic.

Digging into her pants pockets she pulled out the bullet Ludoviko had fired at her. She'd forgotten about it until now. It wasn't any larger or misshapen than other bullets fired from that particular rifle. But robbed of her cartridges, she'd nothing to compare it to. Its color and texture were different. The galvanization was gone, and what remained was heavily oxidized in powdery swirls of red and turquoise.

"What are you looking at?" Roman asked, taking off his awkward rucksack to sit beside her.

"Ludoviko fired the rifle to chase me off. The bullet struck a sphere, entered it, and then ejected it after a moment," Dru explained.

"Impossible," Hadrian grunted, heaving himself onto the ledge. "The Rip is impenetrable. People have tried to drill into the spheres with hydraulic presses, blow them up, chip at them with pneumatic industrial hammers and nothing."

"Have they ever shot at one?"

"I can only assume. Any whim the scientific mind could conjure, I'm sure they tried."

"Then how do you explain this?" Dru said, handing Hadrian the bullet.

He pulled out his reading glasses from a flap on his rucksack and had a look. Mouth agape, he fidgeted with the projectile as he inspected it.

“Could be anything, really.”

“Anything?”

“The salt air has its way with metals.”

“It was galvanized, Hadrian.”

“That could have been ablated away on impact.”

“But the bullet shape is intact. Barely any deformation. It’s nearly the same shape as it was when it left the barrel.”

“Maybe you just thought you saw it enter The Rip. Perhaps it just ricocheted.”

“Give it here,” Dru said, angrily reaching out to snatch it.

Hadrian clenched his fist and pulled his hand back. His eyes grew wide as he opened his hand and looked at the bullet in his palm.

“What?”

“It broke,” Hadrian said apologetically.

“Bullets don’t break.”

Hadrian handed the remnants back to Dru and indeed, the bullet had fragmented. The oxidation nearly penetrated the bullet’s lead core. The jacket’s base alloy had fallen apart into chips like dried clay.

“I don’t understand,” Hadrian exclaimed. “How could a gun fire something so fragile?”

“It wasn’t like that when Ludoviko shot my rifle. Obviously. It would have exploded in the chamber. Something happened to it when it entered The Rip.”

“It’s as if it aged hundreds of years in an instant,” Roman said, taking a look.

“If the Rip degrades things within, how do you explain Milius’s eyeball?” Hadrian asked.

“I can’t explain Milius’s eyeball,” Dru huffed. “No one can.”

“I’m going to set up my radio and see if I can’t catch the science institute’s clock signal,” Roman said, pulling the set from his rucksack. “If I have reception, I should be able to pick up their squawk beacon in a few hours to determine our position.”

“Fine,” Dru said, putting the bullet’s fragments in a side pocket then adjusting her hat for shade. She took off her sun goggles and felt a hushed breeze on her closed eyelids. The hiss of Roman’s radio and the rhythmic pings of a distance circuit lulled her into a brief nap.

“Can someone help me with the antenna?” Roman asked. “Climb up and hold it while I tune in the sidebands.”

Dru woke and looked over at Hadrian. He sat idle, his goggles

fixed on the static world with no intention of moving. Obliging, Dru got up and took the wire reel, then scaled the remaining meters to the peak. She held the wire high, moving it about while Roman fiddled with the receiver knobs. The view on the spire's other side was more intriguing. The Rip broke up a few kilometers beyond, its black tendrils dissipating into a sea of white. Tiny islands continued as the salt flats stretched away.

"The Rip fades up ahead," Dru announced. "I need my binoculars."

She secured the wire and grabbed the field glasses' strap as Roman stretched to hand them up. With scant footing, she wedged her knee in a crevice for stability and carefully brought the binoculars to her eyes.

Along the Rip's 'shoreline', prominences broke the surface. With the wavering mirage in the liminal, a flash caught her eye. She adjusted the focus and flipped in another solar filter. From the haze, a structure emerged on the horizon. Judging from the distance, it was massive. Dru tried to guess its nature from the shape, but its complexity hinted at the artificial.

"There's something really big out there," Dru yelled.

"What?" Hadrian replied, emerging from his trance. "What are you talking about?"

"Not sure. Whatever it is, it isn't natural."

“Is it part of The Rip?”

“I don’t think so.”

The default explanation was that The Rip was a natural phenomena, but no one was certain. Its existence didn’t have an intention, man-made, alien, or otherwise. No consensus existed as to the nature of the planet-wide emergence. But why should it be natural? Hadrian and his colleagues had no working theory, Sinister’s natural philosophers had limited expertise in extreme physics. Despite Sinister’s respectable technology, it paled in comparison to the engineers who’d made The Crossing. While Sinister’s ingenuity remained, its capability was lost.

Dru zoomed out. Trapezoidal shapes formed the core of its structure. Possibly mountains, but the lines were angular, sharp, and straight.

“If it’s not The Rip, then what is it? There’s nothing out here except salt, endless miserable blinding salt. Is it the Nexus?”

“It’s too far away,” Dru said. “You take a look.”

Dru helped Hadrian with the climb and braced his wobbly legs as he grabbed the binoculars. A few moments of adjusting the dials and he was able to lock on. His mouth opened as if to say something, then closed again. Lips pursed.

“Hadrian, what do you think it is?”

“It looks like one of the hulks. But that shouldn’t be possible.”

“L’Estelo Magnus?”

“None other.”

“How?”

“Out of the twenty that the L’Estelo Magnus carried, three were unaccounted for during insertion, or so history has it.”

“They all burned up, I thought,” Dru said, confused. “—Let me take another look.”

Hadrian handed Dru back her field glasses and crawled back down to the ledge. She again steadied herself, bracing her elbows as she gazed through the bulbous lenses. Using her imagination, she reconfigured the shapes in her head to form a section of the starship. Every child, whether they grew up in Vespera, Tajigo, or the lesser colonies knew its outline. The Crossing began their collective timelines and shared history. Its arrival marked Planetfall. Only a few hulk relics remained, the artifacts on display in museums and ministry buildings.

Claims of lost civilizations founded by survivors of the vanished three were the stuff of conspiracists. As a child, Dru remembered fabled stories of shadow kingdoms, ice pyramids, bioluminescent palaces, and the ill-fated expeditions to search out such things. Nothing had ever been found. The most plausible

explanation was the hulks had failed on descent, malfunctioning and catching fire when they hit the atmosphere. Another explanation was that they were ejected during orbital breakaway, either falling into a hopeless orbit or crashing into one of Sinister's two moons.

“How far away is it?” asked Roman.

“I don’t know. Have a look.”

Roman climbed up. His lips moved, whispering the trigonometry in his head. His estimate was fifteen kilometers —or twenty at the most— and a wake or two’s walk. But the route had little shade. So high up, the beacons were strong and Roman believed he could triangulate their position. He checked his watch, another ninety three minutes until the signal.

In the interim, Dru gazed at the hulk’s arcane wonder in incredulity and pondered how no one had discovered it in the intervening centuries. She poured over Roman’s dusty map, again looking for the slightest contour or topographic hiccup that resembled the polar wreckage. Besides a few datums, the map lacked adequate resolution.

Sinister’s shadoward pole and its icy darkness attracted tenfold the interest as the bleached wastes of the Salis Majora. A vast ice sheet crossed by skis and sleds, aided by insulating clothes, the light of both moons, and frozen provisions, made

survival just easier. Also the novelty of black skies filled with stars was far more romantic than the burning wastes of a featureless salt desert. Death by dehydration and hypothermia was less dignified, less heroic. As a result, the sunward pole and its wilderness was mostly unexplored. Only a scant collection of aerial surveys and early handwritten journals existed to inform Sinister's intrepid.

The warbling tones of Vespera's beacon broke through the hiss of the radio. Roman sequenced the signal and wrote out the math to decipher their position. Dru estimated their bearings with her solar sextant while Hadrian fussed with his compass. After some back and forth, they agreed on a direction.

"The hulk's out of our way," Dru said. "And we need to find Milius."

"A significant excursion, I would say. But at least it's physical, unlike that blurry light in Milius's head. Something real, and our current pursuit lacks prudence, I must admit," Hadrian reasoned. "And—"

"—'And' what?" Dru argued. "We abandoned prudence a long time ago."

"It might be the only thing we ever find out in this place, where Baphomet dare tread," Hadrian argued.

"We're not abandoning Milius," Dru snapped.

“The hulk is tangible; I can see it,” Hadrian said, pointing at the distant geometry. “But the Nexus?” He shook his head.

“You don’t think The Nexus is real?”

“It’s obviously real to Milius, but remember who we’re talking about. There’s a reason this expedition was so poorly funded, so threadbare… Milius is a highly damaged individual with a traumatic past. Not the most infallible individual. It’s safe to say the science institute didn’t think he was the safest bet.”

“What are you talking about, Hadrian?” Dru said, confused. “I don’t understand.”

Hadrian shook his head in mock disbelief. “Did you not read his dossier? Or were you too busy doodling in your training manuals and fooling around with that amateurish medic, Cato?”

“You’re inferring quite a lot, wouldn’t you say?” Dru’s throat clenched. Her back spasmed in anger. Hadrian couldn’t help himself. He’d set a trap, but she refused to oblige. “I remembered that he was sickly as a child,” Dru replied, her voice trembling.

“Did he tell you that?”

She nodded.

“Anything else?”

“No.”

Hadrian shook his head and scoffed. “Milius is a trauma

survivor, Druscilla, a victim of terrible child abuse. His mother… —She was the one doing it! She was the one making him and his sister ill. His sister Vera didn't survive."

"How do you know this? This was all in the dossier?"

"Hints of it…"

"Hints?"

"There was mention of 'family issues' and 'psychosomatic distress'," Roman added. "But—"

"—You had to read between the lines," Hadran said, exasperated.

Dru and Roman listened to Hadrian without interruption as he divulged the details of Milius's ordeal. So gratuitous, she found it hard to believe Hadrian wasn't making it up. But Hadran had performed his own additional investigations, it seemed. The level of disturbing detail she would have remembered.

His mother Julia was the middle child of a wealthy family known for their network of tritium stellarators on the Aurora Escarpment, of which Hadrian was a great admirer. She worked as a researcher for the agricultural ministry, designing new filtration bioreactors for rice cultivation. The terraced paddy system was chronically infested with beetle egrets, hosts to a particularly nasty intestinal worm. Over the years, the mother slipped contaminated water to Milius and his sister Vera.

Anemia, weight loss, fatigue, and diarrhea resulted as the larvae grew into intestinal worms. Living in Novum Pax's exclusive Aventine district, no one suspected dirty water. And as such, their illness went undiagnosed. Eventually, a worm invaded his sister's liver. Large cysts developed, restricting blood flow, killing her. An autopsy revealed the true cause.

"A rare attention seeking psychosis, the mother committed suicide when she was exposed. For these types of things, children come up with all kinds of coping mechanisms, imaginary friends, false memories, multiple personalities… It's safe to say that Milius's perception of reality could be slightly off," Hadrian lectured. "To put it mildly."

Dru said nothing, processing what Hadrian had said. She felt nauseous. The ringing in her ears grew louder. The heat mixed with revelation caused her to swoon. She sat down cross-legged on the salt pan and rubbed her forefingers into her temples.

"What possessed you to dig all this up?"

"I had to know what we were dealing with," Hadrian argued. "And apparently it's a troubled individual who was subject to a cruel experiment. Pardon me if I'm a bit skeptical."

"So you're also a psychologist now?" Dru snapped.

Hadrian turned his back, hands on hips, self-satisfied.

"If you're suspicious of Milius, by the Priests of Capricorn,

why would you volunteer for this?”

Hadrian turned and smiled. “Because, how would I have had the opportunity to see the Salis Majora. The data I’ve been able to collect so far, it’s been invaluable,” Hadrian said, pulling out the tattered notebook from one of his jumpsuit pockets. “I can start to publish again.”

“You’re joking.”

Hadrian shook his head. “Not at all.”

Incredulous, Dru looked at Hadrian’s impish grimace. He was telling the truth; she should have known. The Nexus was ancillary to his true goal, revitalizing his diminished scientific career. She turned to the radioman. “What about you, Roman? Do you think The Nexus is just some figment?”

“No. It’s real. The Nexus is real.”

“So it seems you’re in the minority, Hadrian.”

“-Maybe,” Hadrian sniped. “But what’s the boy know?”

“Roman might have a thought with regard to the impacts of childhood adversity,” Dru argued back. “Growing up as he did.”

“But…” Roman started.

“But what?” Dru asked.

“The hulk might have something to do with The Rip. We don’t know. It’s a relic. It’s important. ”

“Et tu Roman?” Dru sighed, resigned. “Fine. Vespera is a

democracy, isn’t it? We’re not Tajigo. Let’s put it to a vote.”

Dru’s urgency to rescue Milius had to be tempered by the need to avoid mutiny. And splitting up was certain death. They needed each other despite Hadrian’s company. Roman and Hadrian out-voted her. Milius would have to wait.

“Alright then.” Dru surrendered. “We make for the hulk.”

CHAPTER FIVE: THE GEYSER

The desert continued much as it had, broken in places, flat in others. They followed an arm of The Rip to maximize shade before it fell away and left them exposed. More spheres were embedded in the crust. The shapes blocked their view and made navigation difficult. Above the noise of their own breathing and shuffling, Dru heard a distant horn. The bass was deep, so deep, she thought she felt its vibration.

The tone was intermittent. Dru chose to ignore it at first, dismissing it as some modulated frequency of her tinnitus. The higher latitudes and thinner air played tricks on the mind. When she heard the sound a second time, she stopped.

“What is that?”

Hadrian and Roman looked randomly about.

“Could it be a salt angel?” Roman wondered.

“Salt angels have <u>that</u> mating whistle, but it's too high

pitched," Hadrian said, cupping his ear and panning about to find the sound's direction.

The tone was less organic and more like a pipe organ. Hadrian guessed the direction, and they changed their course to investigate. A wary Roman hung back.

"What if it's a predator?"

"Think Roman. What prey is this far sunward? A few dying salt angels? A wayward isopod and its entourage of parasitic mites?" Hadrian mocked.

"It could be anything. We don't know," Roman said.

"You're right. We don't know. But we do have common sense and educated inference on our side," Hadrian derided.

"I'm sure I could think of a few instances where your 'educated inference' has failed you, Hadrian," Dru said.

While Dru tried to be sympathetic —self aware of her tone— Hadrian berated him like a cranky elder. Needing to defend the boy, she chided Hadrian, but he said nothing. Dru always forgot Roman was so young. He was more a boy than a man with a naivete Dru took for granted, and sometimes took advantage of.

Both his parents had died of necrotic bacillus on a foggy mushroom croft. Loners, they'd never bothered with obtaining genetic licenses. Just a baby, a remote surveying team found Roman wakes later, dehydrated, soiled, and starved. He'd grown

up a product of Novum Pax’s state policy, a non-conforming orphan. A throwback to the dysfunction of Planetfall demographics, rules regarding who could and couldn’t procreate were strictly enforced. Parents were punished, and their outlaw children removed and sequestered from the ‘mating populace’. But every now and then, a true orphan showed up, a misfit.

His vocational aptitude scores were low; his mind was elsewhere. But Novum Pax’s Progress Ministry rarely allowed for exceptions, and the boy was relegated to a remote work clan. Dru saw the powerless frustration in Hadrian's squinted eyes and tight jaw when Hadrian rudely asserted his dominance over him. Being so young, he wasn’t bitter; he was too smart to truly be bitter. Instead, he stoked a guarded hope. Dru couldn’t help but admire it. Always in the company of unsympathetic elders, Roman never voiced his own opinions. Like a kid brother, he tended to go along with the whims of the expedition without complaint. He was a stowaway afterall.

Roman’s defining act of rebellion was escaping his charterhouse, an offense punishable by excommunication. On the run, an emancipated friend, working in records, tweaked the database to create Roman proper credentials. By the time anyone realized the expedition's communications officer was nothing more than an orphaned radio tower operator —albeit a gifted one—

they were well beyond the Meridiem Massif. Ava and Dru pleaded his case via longwave and the matter was officially ‘deferred’, a small victory. Nothing more was said. In a way, the expedition was his audition for official plebeian society –a way to escape his de-facto servitude– if of course he could survive the Salis Majora.

“I felt something on my face,” Roman said, touching his forehead and cheeks.

Dru felt it as well. A light mist wetted her skin. Soon the mist turned to droplets and then something like rain. Halos encircled the shadows of nearby orbs, the white-and-black monochrome transformed into refracted color. Dru took off her goggles to see the rainbows.

They sped up in search of the source, looking skyward and half-expecting to see clouds. The drizzle turned into a downpour. Water streamed off the spheres. The shapes were geometrically perfect –measured to the micrometer by Vespan mathematicians– and as such, water drained from them with precision. At the spheres’ nadir, a laminar flow formed a seamless link to the ground. The larger orbs spouted wide clear columns while the smaller ones dripped and spurted in fits.

“Where is this coming from?”

“It’s fresh,” Hadrian said, tasting the drops with his finger.

They found the source a few meters beyond. A lukewarm geyser erupted from one of the lesser spires. The mineral-rich water had mixed with the salts to build the formation. The Salis Majora was littered with smaller stalagmites, but this was a monstrous version. The three walked around the geyser as it erupted, bodies dampened by the fountain. And just as quickly as the miracle arrived, it ceased, leaving puddles of cloudy brine on the desert floor.

“Damnedest thing,” Hadrian said.

Roman unhooked the sled and took off his rucksack to make sure his radio hadn’t been soaked. Dru wandered about and inspected the aftermath. After a few minutes the water had drained away. Below each sphere was a single hole. Like a perfect funnel, the water collected then drained into a whirlpool. Some holes were large enough for Dru to put her arm into, the sides smooth with silicates. All were dry after a few minutes. The desert crust here was porous like a sponge.

After a quarter hour, it was as if the eruption never happened. The shadows preserved some dampness but not for long. The air was immediately humid. The shock of it gave Dru pause. The steaminess made her lightheaded and she noticed the others swoon as well.

“It cycles,” Dru exclaimed. “The drain holes under The Rip,

they must have taken time to form.”

Hadrian wandered from sphere to sphere inspecting the holes, his head panning back and forth to the geyser. The spire was narrow and looked like the proboscis of some underground giant. The top had a sickly pink flesh color. Dru found it indescribably off-putting.

“The Rip hasn’t been around <u>that</u> long,“ Roman said. “These eruptions must be happening often.”

“My theory is that there’s a vast aquifer below this desert fed by the fluvial latitudes,” Hadrian said, inspecting the geyser’s base. “There’s just too much drainage for all that water flow. It has to go somewhere.”

“Underground rivers, maybe.”

As they lingered, the deep resonant tones started again. The geyser hummed like the chanting of a monk. Then came the whistling rush, and the howling. The first blasts shot out the top like a cannon. They were doused with torrential drops, a rain beyond anything Dru could remember.

Roman took cover under a larger orb to save his radio while Hadrian meandered about and became soaked. Dru cupped her hands to catch the steady flow from a sphere high overhead. She splashed her face with the water and felt the sticky grime of sweat, sun paste, and salt wash clean. She slipped out of her

jumpsuit and indulged in a provisional shower.

Hadrian glanced her way but quickly averted his eyes. Roman followed the cue. However his eyes lingered with adolescent curiosity in a shy but conspicuous gaze. The radioman hadn't been around girls much; he wasn't allowed. Vespera's genetic laws forbid orphans from procreating. Because Roman's parents had died and he was undocumented, his genetic pedigree was lost. As a result, he'd been lumped in with others by default. The law was austere for plebians. No grace. As such, the orphanages and work clans were gender segregated. Almost monastic, their social lives were aggressively managed. The intention was for them to live and die celibate. Dru's mother always lamented Novum Pax's 'soft eugenics' or as the Progress Ministry phrased it, 'The Harmony Initiative.' Urbo had no such laws, a fact not lost on Vespan propagandists.

Dru found his gaze amusing, his shyness endearing, specifically with how little she cared. All three were barely surviving together, notions of civilized sensibilities felt quaint, if not absurd. With dwindling food, precarious water supplies –save their current fortune– and flagging strength, they were in a desperate situation. For now, however, she felt relieved they'd kept it together. The scene of Delfino and Ludoviko, mad at the oasis, haunted her.

After showering, Dru drenched her clothes in the runoff, wrung them out and laid them over a collection of smaller orbs. She opened the top of her canvas canteen and filled it, telling the others to do the same. The water had a mineral taste but was mostly fresh, lacking any hint of saline. A few drops of iodine and they were replenished.

When the eruption ended, they carried on. Dru's clothes quickly dried. Their reprieve from the searing desert was over. They stopped when The Rip stopped. They decided to take advantage of the last of the plentiful shade, unrolling their thin foam sleeping mats to nap. Dru was restless –the ringing in her ears loud– but her dream's intensity persisted. Always the spheres, unrelenting and constant. Asleep, her mind forced meaning where there was none. When she'd wake, what made sense dissolved.

Since no scientific consensus existed for The Rip, spiritual notions were rife. While Vespans were performatively religious – grafting and adapting ancient faiths from The Crossing– they weren't devout. However, references to 'divine wrath' and 'Armageddon' were inevitable. But nobody had the stomach for it; zealousness for such nonsense was too exhausting. Part of The Rip's paradox was that it was completely inert. It lacked pneuma. Besides consuming space, it did nothing else.

Even with a dearth of religious fervor, a harmless cult did emerge around Milius and The Nexus. Novum Pax was quick to interdict, and with Milius's cooperation, nascent messianic worship was nipped in the bud. Working in his favor was his nebbish demeanor, sickly physicality, and unsure personality, culminating in a lack of cultish charisma. Regardless, it didn't stop a handful of lunatics from trying. In a vacuum of answers, superstition crept in. And as much as Dru resisted, she too was susceptible.

"Ancient knowledge," she babbled as she woke.

Hadrian looked at her then went back to idly gazing in the direction of the hulk. The changing terrain had reinvigorated him. He studied Roman's map more often, a map he'd disparaged not but a wake before, opining about Sinister's polar geology. And he was always the first to start off after they'd broken camp. So tantalizingly close to a true relic of the L'Estelo Magnus, gone were his pessimistic diatribes, endless laments and regrets.

"Can I borrow your binoculars," he asked.

Dru nodded, pulling them out of her rucksack and handing them over.

"I see it," he said, adjusting the focus dials.

At ground level, they'd lost their bearings, until now. He

pointed into the blinding white and handed her back her field glasses. She followed his finger and adjusted the focus. With less haze between them and the ship, detail resolved. No longer a silhouette, she could see the hulk's massive wedge shape, broken apart into a vast debris field that stretched for kilometers. Glints from finer details –antennas, hatches, vents– twinkled across the hull of the segmented starship.

"How long is it, do you think?"

"Two or three kilometers, maybe more. L'Estelo Magnus was twenty kilometers put together, give-or-take, so doing the math…"

"There's a few 'islands' we can make en-route. Enough shade for a little rest."

They set off again. The open desert proved more challenging than they remembered. The irony was that while The Rip was a blight across the face of Sinister, it offered a navigable archipelago in the polar regions. Its islands and miniature 'continents' were exploitable terrain. Mapped out –as the Tigans had done– the Rip provided a sheltering route for safe passage.

"We should investigate the hulk and all this later. Stay the course for the Nexus, for Milius," Dru said, the heat catching up with her.

Nobody said anything. She turned to see if they'd heard her. A

few nods of ambivalence was all.

“The heat’s too much, and Milius—”

“—Druscilla, it’s nearly too much for us—”

“—I know Delfino and Ludoviko are mistreating him.”

“This isn’t like Marcus, Dru,” Hadrian said, breathing hard. “Those Tigans have supplies —our supplies— where Marchus had nothing. They’re better off than us.”

“Marcus was an accident,” Roman added. “He couldn’t be helped.”

“We don’t know that.”

Marcus had been their surveyor —their mapmaker— and was the last of their expedition to perish after the attack.

They’d lost him a few wakes into the salt desert. Before they reached the Salis Majora, they’d navigated the endless swamps and stagnant marshes of the fluvial latitudes, much of it by boat. The Rip’s pixelated maze was ever-present there as well, but natural landmarks —lagoons, berms, streams, eskers, and copses of sickly trees— made it easier to find each other if separated. Beyond the deltas and into the Salis Majora proper, all that was forgotten luxury.

In search of less brackish water, Marcus ventured out into the salt flats by himself, not telling anyone, and got lost. Suspended and groundborne spheres were a mix in the area.

Grazing herds of isopods were plentiful, but they were migratory and their tracks and scat didn't offer adequate landmarks. They spent hours searching for him, careful not to separate. Exasperated, they'd hoisted Dru atop a sphere to have a look. The view was maddening. She confused smaller orbs with what she thought was Marcus's head. The Rip played tricks. After hours searching, they heard a faint shout. But echo scrambled all sound within The Rip's labyrinth. Finding direction was impossible and as a result, they meandered aimlessly.

The shouts were ephemeral. The air was soon still. Marcus was either completely lost, or his strength had waned. The four survivors came to the realization that Marcus was gone — completely gone— and they weren't ever going to find him.

The loss of Marcus was the fault of Marcus himself. However blame for the attack lay squarely at Dru's feet. And this chronic guilt fed her angst after abandoning Milius to his kidnappers. The time left to find him was fleeting, and their jaunt to the hulk stole precious hours and minutes.

CHAPTER SIX: THE SPIDER

“A wake or two once we get to the hulk, and then we head for the Nexus,” Dru asserted.

“Fine,” Hadrian said, nodding as he struggled on. “There’s a bit of shade up ahead.”

The sphere cluster was close to the ground but adequate for shelter. They scrunched down and crowded under the orb to shield themselves from the zenith sun. The hulk loomed larger now, its details revealed. The darker partitions were in fact cavernous ruptures, massive gaps that rippled the hull. The starship’s landing had been catastrophic.

“Something's moving out there,” Roman said, pointing. “They’re salt angels. Quite a sight this far poleward. I’m surprised they have enough air to fly. The weak oxygen, I can feel it with every step.”

Dru took out her binoculars and zoomed in. Three smaller specimens fluttered about. They were either a different subtype or juveniles, unhindered by the light air. After some aerial play, the creatures settled on a perch. The perch itself, however, was most peculiar. Dru gasped and pulled the field glasses away.

“What is it?” Hadrian asked.

“It’s a spider, a ‘salis arachnid’ I think. Maybe Delfino was right. Maybe they’re not extinct.”

“It’s dead, it seems. Completely upended, legs to the sky,” Roman said, squinting.

Dru zoomed in. The salt angels balanced on the tips of the arachnid’s crumpled legs. The spider’s body was shiny and gray in color. Tubes near its eyestalks vented wisps of smoke or steam. One of the angels appeared to bob up and down. The articulated tip of the spider’s leg joint was reflexively moving. The arachnid wasn’t dead; it was dying.

“It’s still alive,” Dru said, handing off the binoculars for the others to have a look.

“A neurological response.”

“I’m no paleontologist –and those that bother with lazarus species and cryptozoology, I’ve always taken for fools– but here we are, and here it is –or so it seems. I must admit, I have no

idea what a ‘salis arachnid’ looked like,” Hadrian said.

“I remember a fossil from the museum in Novum Pax,” Roman said. “Its exoskeleton had this texture to it, pitted with breathing holes. Very strange. But that’s all I can recall.”

“Were they desert creatures?”

“I presume,” Hadrian said, shrugging his shoulders. “An apex predator, one of the first, a case study in Sinister’s high-speed evolutionary gigantism.”

All of the spider’s legs continued to move in a strange death dance like a disembodied waving hand.

“How long does it take for the damned thing to die?”

“Let’s go have a look,” Dru said, pulling out her wilderness blade. “Whatever it’s doing, it's harmless now.”

“I wouldn’t be so sure,” Hadrian protested. “Who knows what it’s up to. It could be pretending. It could be a trap.”

“It could be. But why wouldn’t it have gone after the salt angels?”

“Maybe salt angeles aren’t to its liking.”

“Even Delfino and Ludoviko ate a salt angel. I seriously doubt an arachnid would be more discerning. What else would something eat out here?”

“Us, maybe?”

“I’ll go with you Dru,” Roman offered, interrupting.

“That’s a good idea,” Hadrian sniped. “The both of you go, and I’ll stay back and observe, maybe get the medical kit, just in case.”

“Fine,” Dru sneered. After teasing Roman about ‘unknown predators’ in the Salis Majora, Hadrian’s nerve aggravated her. “Stay here, Hadrian. You coward.” She turned to Roman. “Let’s empty the sled and go out, you and me.”

The salt angels fluttered away when they approached. Dru and Roman quickly came to the realization that the salis arachnid was not as spider-like as it first appeared.

“I count ten legs,” Roman said.

“The two up front could be mandibles, maybe.”

The arachnid –or whatever it was– had obvious mechanical features. Its head was nothing more than a sensor array of lenses crowned with tubes and exhaust ports that belched wisps of smoke. No mouth existed. In its place were several metallic hose-like couplers for lubrication or refrigerants. Its carapace consisted of interlocking shells that served as its exoskeleton. Shiny purple pins, bolts and rivets held it all together. Dru and Roman heard a mechanical whir of servos or hydraulic pumps cycling deep inside. The ten legs continued to move in a chaotic undulating manner.

“It’s a machine.”

“No machine of ours.”

“Is it from the hulk?”

“Maybe —I don’t know.”

Its malfunctions continued. Dru touched its shell with her knife. No arcs or sparks. They each grabbed two of its legs and heaved it onto the sled, then grabbed a strap and started to drag it. The spider was heavy and the going was slow. The hundred meters was arduous, even when Hadrian shuffled out to help. To inspect it properly, they needed to get it into the shade. And Dru knew Hadrian would want to take his time dissecting it.

Once back, they pulled the wreck underneath one of the larger spheres. Hadrian got to work studying it while Dru and Roman sipped from their canteens and rested. Hadrian admitted he’d little idea regarding its origins but did say its proximity to the L’Estelo Magnus hulk was suspect. The technological inventory of the first colonists at Planetfall was well documented, and this mechanical spider seemed too impractical. The robot —if that’s what it was— wouldn’t have fit a niche in those early days. Agriculture, industry, manufacturing… The spider didn’t appear kitted for such things.

“Why would this automata just spontaneously hatch and crawl out of the hulk after centuries?” Dru wondered. “Right at the

time we just happened to wander by."

"Maybe it hatched because we were wandering by. Maybe it detected us, then came out searching for its long lost masters," Roman said.

"And do what? Say hello then drop dead?"

Roman shrugged.

Vespan children learned Sinister's early history in school. While much of it was colored by colonial politics, the era of Planetfall was well understood. And part of that understanding was how early colonists lived. Historic reenactments were common, and historians were meticulous in ensuring the era's authenticity. And while the technology from Planetfall was more sophisticated then what Sinister had at present, Dru couldn't recall anything like that which lay twitching before her.

Using Dru's knife and his recovered rock hammer, Hadrian went about vivisecting the writhing spider with Roman's help. After some sweaty work, they'd pried off its abdominal plates. Under was a hatch with a flexible hermetic seal. Dru grabbed the discarded plate and inspected it.

She flexed it and the plate cracked in two, exposing a frayed composite weave. The spider's carapace was brittle, for something she expected to be ruggedized. Roman pulled on the seal around the hatch. Cracked and yellowed, the tubing came up

easily and broke apart. In the middle of the hatch was a latch with no handhold, only a bolt pattern.

“Not sure how we open this thing up. The mechanism is all corroded,” Roman said, picking at the hatch’s fittings.

Hadrian pounded on it with his hammer until it eventually cracked and gave way. A gasp of smoke purged from a tube near the spider’s ‘head’, then ceased. They crowded around to take a look inside.

“I can only guess it’s a kind of organic circuitry mixed with microfluidics,” Hadrian said. “That large corrugated tube there runs back somewhere important in its abdomen. Let’s find out where it goes.”

Hadrian and Roman fought the reflexive spider legs, then went about eviscerating the half-alive machine. Roman noted that the circuitry —’circuitry’ being a loose descriptor— was scorched in places, melted in others, and commingled with a fluid of distinct color. The smell was terrible, a noxious and overpowering chemical odor. Dru stepped back and covered her nose.

Soon, they broke something loose from within. The robotic spider finally let go, relaxed, and ceased to move. Hadrian identified what he guessed was the robot’s reactor. Shaped like an egg, the device resembled a bird’s nest hiding a pulsing blue

glow. Not hot or warm, it held an energy that none of them could properly appreciate.

"The battery."

Roman yanked and broke the couplers that connected it to the chassis. A snap and spark gave way to quiet as the pumps and servos grew still.

"Whoever designed this knew what they were doing. This is highly sophisticated," Hadrian remarked. "I want to say it's an atomic power cell, but it doesn't give off any heat."

"That may be a treasure, but the rest of this heap is absolute trash. It's one massive pile of malfunction," Dru said. "What went wrong with it?"

"Like the guts of an antique radio," Roman said, poking and prodding the organic wiring board and its mounted components. "Look at the oxidation. This may be state-of-the-art but it's been through hell. A complete end-of-life failure."

"Could be alien technology that was here before L'Estelo Magnus," Hadrian speculated. "It woke from hibernation, dug itself up, and had a look around."

Dru had no answers. What it was seemed beside the point, what it was designed for, however… that was a different matter. Besides a head full of optics and microwave sensors, and legs to move it all about, its purpose was ambiguous.

“There's symbols on some of the components. Look,” Roman said, pointing out engravings along its inner frame. “Glyphs or a code, or something. Why?”

“Logograms or morphemes… ” Dru speculated.

“Why is there writing on any machine?” Hadrian said. “Part numbers, service instructions, version identification, assembly hierarchies… —this thing had to have been manufactured somewhere.”

“But that’s all so…” Dru fought for the right word, ”ordinary.”

Hadrian went about dislodging and prying up smaller components. He was careful to keep the parts intact and not destroy them. If by some miracle, they made it back home, he wanted to preserve a hint of it to reverse engineer. As it was, the machine’s inner workings were so alien as to defy obvious context. Roman set up his radio and went about triangulating their position.

“Beacon in about thirty minutes.”

The signal was weak but adequate, and he calculated their location to mark the spider encounter, and to a lesser extent — or greater extent depending— the hulk.

Dru thought of Delfino and the wound he’d suffered. With the salis arachnid still a myth, this robotic version was the

obvious perpetrator. But why had it attacked him? Delfino had suffered his wounds a hundred kilometers or more away. This wasn't the only one –it couldn't be– this was one of many, an army sprung from a massive nest unseen.

"Delfino said this, or a duplicate of it, stabbed him. But looking at it, I'm not sure I believe him."

"No fangs or pincers. But that proboscis… " Hadrian said, grabbing a hold of its recessed articulate tongue. "It could choke the life out of you. Nasty thing, must have impressive hydraulics."

"Maybe there's something internal, a telescoping pike, or bolt mechanism," Roman said.

"He would have mentioned it. The creature is mechanical, not a mythical monster. Delfino isn't dumb; he's smart. He would have mentioned all this.–"

"–If this didn't attack him, then what did? Maybe he was telling the truth. Maybe there's a real salis arachnid running around and this is a mimic," Roman speculated. "Like a decoy."

"Too much of a coincidence," Dru said. "This has something to do with his story; I'm sure of it. I just don't know what. Delfino is a liar and a deceiver. Whatever the truth is, we're not going to figure it out now."

"I'm guessing he was trying to conceal a previous encounter,"

Hadrian added. “But I can’t fathom why.”

“Perhaps this was a clandestine mission,” Dru speculated. “Any ideas what that might be, Hadrian? You must have a theory or two, a man of theories, such as yourself.”

“I know nothing of espionage and spycraft,” Hadrian pished. “Why would I?”

“Well Baphomet strike me a bargain, Hadrian has no opinions,” Dru scoffed.

“Do you think this thing has something to do with The Rip?” Roman offered.

“Yes,” Dru snapped. “This isn’t a coincidence.”

How the spider had anything to do with the cataclysm wasn’t clear. The Rip could have manifested such things, but how it did this was beyond their ability to deduce. The Rip was a three dimensional version of a shadow, an idea they only knew in two dimensions. And like a shadow, the nature of whatever created it was impossible to know from the darkness alone. The creator of Sinister’s transdimensional eclipse existed on some unseen astral plane.

Dru dug into the pocket of her trousers and pulled out the ejected fragments of the bullet. Besides its lead alloy core, its jacket was now nothing more than dust coating her fingertips.

Dru could see the same aging in the husk of the spider. Hadrian drew a similar conclusion; Dru could tell as he scrutinized both the bullet’s relic and souvenirs he'd recovered from the spider. A man of science, he was forming a manifold of viable hypotheses. They would have to muse and speculate another time and time was short.

“Pack up. Let’s get moving.”

CHAPTER SEVEN: THE HULK

The hulk had broken into sections upon impact. Closer in, they noticed its trapezoidal hull was draped in a tangle of rigging. Tattered canvas clung to the lines like the buntings of wind-whipped flags. But the flags weren’t flags; they were the remnants of parachutes deployed for entry and descent. Attached to the hulk’s sides were gimbaled nacelles of the retro rockets, colossus unto themselves. All were crumpled and collapsed, their original shapes ruined by physical impact and the passage of time. Dru pondered what had caused the crash. But the reasons were self-evident. The atmosphere was too thin, leaving no air column adequate for braking. The boosters and parachutes had

done little.

The hulk had succumbed to an error —a glitch— involving celestial mechanics and atmospheric science. The navigators of L'Estelo Magnus had thoroughly prospected Sinister. Such things would be necessary for orbital insertion and release of the starship's twenty hulks. With the planet's habitable regions identified —which were few— the precious cargo was undocked and sent on its way. However, three hulks disappeared and were never heard from. After a voyage of a thousand years, to be 'dashed upon the rocks'… She hadn't planned on bearing witness to one of Sinister's founding tragedies. Amongst the ruins were its victims. This place was a tomb —she knew it— and she hadn't prepared herself for what lay inside.

They arrived at a vast trench that marked the beginning of the debris field. The hulk had come down at a grazing angle and skidded to a halt. They walked adjacent to the furrow and looked in. The trench wasn't deep, the height of a person. The scar exposed layers of the Salis Majora's strata. Hadrian studied the geology, idly carrying on about solar oscillations and the melting of the shadow-ward ice sheets. He described how the meltwater cyclically flooded the desert and turned it into a shallow saltwater ocean. Each time, the brine evaporated, leaving behind a fresh layer of salt.

“It's a geological meter stick, all this,” Hadrian said, panting as he struggled to tow the sled.

Dru tried to follow his narrative, but her mind wandered.

“This ditch is two hundred thousand years deep or more, I’d say.”

The trench’s floor was filled with a slurry that had percolated up from deeper aquifers. The crusted slush was light blue and opaque like milk. Wafts of gas, bubbling up from anaerobic pockets below, overpowered Dru with a sulfuric sting, forcing her to pinch her nose. As much as Hadrian’s geological curiosity compelled him, Dru and Roman drifted away to avoid the stomach churning odor.

“They say Sinister was the contingency, the last resort,” Roman said, looking ahead at the looming hulk.

“Sounds vaguely familiar,” Dru said, breathing hard in the heat.

“And that’s how it got its name.”

“How ‘what’ got its name?”

“Sinister,” Roman said. “There was another planet in a sister star system enroute. They launched a prospecting probe ahead to investigate, before the L’Estelo Magnus’s retro rockets needed to be fired. They’d only enough fuel for one stop; they had to be certain.”

“What did they find?”

“Initial remote sensing data was promising,” Roman continued. “At first glance it was similar to the homeworld, with much less water, but with some primitive multicellular life, cycles of light and darkness –or ‘day’s and ‘nights’, as they’re called. The planet even had a few moons.”

“–Nights?” Dru said, incredulous.

“Cycles similar to the homeworld. Reasonably survivable temperatures, not too cold and not too hot, and enough oxygen as well, maybe too much.”

“–This sounds like a myth, Roman, early hour long-wave banter, or something.”

“I can’t vouch for it, because I don’t really remember where I heard it, but hear me out…”

“Fair enough. Continue.”

“–Anyway, the founding team –awake at the time– were convinced this was it, the <u>right</u> planet. They were so convinced, they named it <u>Dexter</u> <u>Domum</u> –from the old language– to assert its place as the favorable world, but–”

“–but what?”

“–But the probe saw radiation readings off the charts, heavy nuclides at lethal levels that covered the vast majority of the livable surface.”

“But it had life?”

“It seemed, but life uniquely adapted to heavy nuclide emissions. Regardless, the place was poisoned, and L’Estelo Magnus carried on for another few centuries until it arrived here,” Roman said, gesturing and waving his hands about.

“And the name?”

“Before The Crossing, an eyeball planet was a phenomenon astronomers postulated. They assumed such worlds existed somewhere. But besides a few moons in the homeworld’s solar system, nothing of the sort had ever been observed.”

“An eyeball planet?”

“A tidally locked world with one face always staring into the sun, the other always in darkness. From outer space it's supposed to look like an ‘eyeball'. So, the opposite of the right planet isn’t the wrong planet, it’s the left planet, and the whole eyeball thing, well… Oculus Sinister —the left eye of darkness— an anatomical reference. After a while, they just shortened it to Sinister.”

“A joke?” Dru said with a sardonic smile. “That makes bizarre sense, doesn’t it?”

Roman nodded and huffed a laugh.

“How do you know so much, Roman?” Dru asked, at ease in the radioman’s company. Being alone with Roman was usually awkward.

Dru tried to avoid it, the stuttering conversations and stalled non-sequiturs, but this was a rare occasion

“We did without at the orphanage, but information was plentiful; we had database access. The other boys were too busy acting out to be bothered –causing trouble for the minders– and I didn’t much like the others,” Milius replied.

“Did they bully you?”

Roman shook his head. “No. Not really. Most of the boy's parents had either failed blood audits, lacked genetic licenses, or were found out. Very few like me. Bitter, hopeless, and full of hormones, most couldn’t settle down to tie their boots let alone ingest Sinister’s etymology. The information lounges were always empty and quiet. I slept there sometimes.”

“I’m sorry Roman, you didn’t deserve what you got.”

Roman shrugged.

“Ava and I weren’t very good students. Too busy knocking into each other.”

“You found your niche, I think. You’re good at what you do,” Roman said, attempting a compliment.

“Maybe. We’ll have to see, won’t we?”

They walked on in silence until Roman stopped and turned around. Hadrian was gone. They shielded their eyes and scanned the bleached landscape. Dru saw a fleck in the white. She pulled

out her binoculars and spotted Hadrian laying flat on his back, the sled overturned beside him.

“Damn!” she yelled, jogging back. “Damn! Damn!”

She’d enforced an equitable sharing of the sled’s burden, with shifts meted out by the timer alarm on Roman’s watch. Despite Hadrian’s acidic quips, he hadn’t moaned about the sled. In fact, he’d leaned into it with gusto. But his breathing had turned into pants, and he needed to stop more often, and the thinning air made it worse. The fumes —the gas— must have delivered the finishing blow.

Dru and Roman should have known it was too much for the scientist. But Hadrian had a preternatural will decoupled from the mechanisms of pain and exhaustion, almost insect-like. Despite being ridden with joint injuries, cartilage tears, and bursitis, he soldiered on throughout the expedition without complaint. Uncoordinated, he often stumbled, only to shoo away attempts to tend to his scrapes and lacerations.

Once asked about his two missing fingers, Hadrian told the story of a skating rally through the Glacies Caldera in the terminator latitudes. A labyrinth of narrow lakes, the thermal flow and refreeze created flat sheets of featureless ice. The race was long and nearly a thousand kilometers. After he’d missed a checkpoint, a search party was launched. Hadrian was

found a wake later skating aimlessly, hypothermic and confused with extensive frostbite. After warming up, his fingers were amputated with a shrug. And then he went on to finish the race like nothing happened. Half of his forefinger and all of his pinky on his left hand, he claimed, were never of much use anyway.

“Hadrian!” Dru shouted as she landed on her knees next to him.

He was alive, breathing erratically but breathing none-the-less. Dru sat him up and let him sip from her canteen. He babbled something about being lightheaded and nauseous. With few signs of The Rip close by, the next chance at shade was the hulk itself.

“What happened?” Roman said, arriving after Dru.

“He’s hyperthermic. I think he has a fever. Let’s load him onto the sled with everything else. We’ll have to tow him.”

“That’s a lot of weight.”

Dru nodded.

She guessed the hulk was another two hours away, unencumbered. They’d few options to shield Hadrian from the blazing sun. Dru doused the scientist’s brimmed hat with precious canteen water, then haphazardly set it dripping on his head. They both picked up a strap and heaved. Dru’s calf muscles burned. Like a neurotic parent, she stopped often to glance back. Roman grew

annoyed and told her to keep her eyes ahead.

She spotted a lonely orb off to their right, one they hadn’t previously noticed. The detour to reach it, however, wasn’t trivial. And other than shade, they needed a more substantial camp. But the fortunes of the wreck were unknown. Dru wasn’t sure how it could benefit them. Baking for centuries in such a godforsaken corner of Sinister, the hulk might’ve been a treasure for would-be archaeologists, but for survivors… no guarantees; any salvage might’ve corroded away long ago.

They slowed when they reached the hulk, now a massive metal wall. A faceted cliff of unending bulkheads, ducting, power arrays, and paneling dwarfed them. The hulk's outer shell was coated in a rusted patina. A few coves —most likely hatches for personnel or cargo— retained much of what was L’Estelo Magnus’s original color, a gunmetal sheen with aluminum cross-hatch.

The wreck was half buried, its full weight punched through the surface into the brackish slurry. A furrow of tumult and boulder-sized chunks separated it from the desert flats. They continued past remnants of a retro rocket and vines of parachute strands until they came to a cavernous breach. Their eyes —constricted from the salt pan’s blinding white— made peering into the darkness impossible. Leaving Hadrian in the partial shade of a shredded parachute, they climbed over the outer berm

and inside.

They'd no torches nor lamps; they hadn't needed them until now. They'd jettisoned their liquid fuel when the last isopod died. No tinder in the Salis Majora. The darkness was unexpected, and they were unprepared.

"If we climb in a little, our eyes will adjust," Roman suggested.

"Sure," Dru replied, stepping into the black.

While cavernous, the space was warm and stuffy, not optimal for Hadrian's heat exhaustion. A few meters in and they struggled to gain footing as they negotiated piles of debris. Heeding caution, they stopped and waited for their eyes to dilate. Dru felt agoraphobic. The unseen expanse was intimidating. She couldn't remember the last time she'd experienced pitch black.

Phantom noises echoed in the stillness. Drips, creaks, and skittering filled Dru with dread. She thought of the spiders — real spiders— that abided by rules of predation and ecological food chains. They proceeded, following a downward slope over more rubble and into the dark. Sliding, they used their hands to steady themselves with the steepening grade. Another step and Dru's foot sloshed through stagnant water, her feet lodged in sediment.

“Flooded,” Dru whispered.

“Brine.”

Dru dipped her fingers and tasted it.

“Strong and alkaline. The lower hull is filled.”

Her eyes caught dim reflections along the starship’s inner walls. With her pupils still dilating, her first impression was the texture of maize or a sunflower, a wall of tightly packed unit cells clinging to the hulk’s interior in tessellated rows and columns.

“Hibernation pods,” Dru whispered.

“Yeah?”

“Hundreds of them.”

The impact and centuries of gravity had taken its toll. Empty swaths, where the pods had given way and broken free from their moorings, exposed zones of bare scaffold. The remnants sat heaped in a sodden mound that filled the wide shallow pond at the bottom. Bent and collapsed stanchions criss-crossed the space like fallen trees. Dru waded out.

She passed the pile of capsules, now nothing more than undifferentiated wreckage. She found one intact —still clinging to the wall— and approached it. Its once transparent canopy had yellowed into a diffuse nearly opaque surface. Like the hulk’s exterior, the pod’s outside was corroded, its readouts and

monitors mineralized bas-relief.

“What are you doing?” Roman asked, breaking the quiet.

“I want to open it.

“Don’t.”

“Why?”

“It’s just…”

This wasn’t the wreck of a starship; it was a tomb filled with hundreds of unintentional sarcophagi. For a split second, before the inevitable, these people were alive and asleep in-fugue where she stood. The last time they’d been awake was some clinical departure lounge orbiting the homeworld. Maybe their family was present, or well wishers, saying their last goodbyes. And now they were here, nothing more than long forgotten detritus.

She grabbed the brittle edge of the pod’s canopy. The ancient latch sheared and gave way. With a crack, the edifice shattered then fell to the ground revealing a human, a human in name only. A mummy now, the thing’s bones and sinew were held together by the frayed remnants of a sleep suit. A network of tubes spiraled out over the suit like a surrogate circulatory system, in-flight cooling for temperature regulation.

The mummy had no face. Eyes, mouth, and nose were covered by an apparatus meant to preserve and sustain the passenger’s more

sensitive biology. The visage evoked primal feelings in Dru. Unlike the decayed remains of an animal, this person spoke to her across a time gulf. She reached out to touch it but stopped. Instead, she stepped aside and exposed the mummy to the dim light of the breach.

Roman gasped, but his curiosity for the electro-mechanical overcame his repulsion. He touched and traced out the pod's ancient features. Museum artifacts and photographs were all Dru had as witness to Sinister's pioneer era, nothing tangible. Museum pastiche, fabricated by archaeologists and curators, never felt real to her. But this… Dru felt a closer bond to the pod's doomed voyage, thinking of its passengers' lineage to her own Tigan ancestors. Ignoring Roman, she poked at the mummy's suit. It weighed nothing, like a bale of dried straw. The body was completely desiccated. A few pushes and it let go. The mummy slipped its straps and toppled down into a heap atop the canopy shards.

"Did you have to do that?" Roman moaned, batting away the stirred up dust.

"I didn't know," Dru said, the sack of bones, ossified flesh, and bits of hair at her feet. "There's nothing left."

"Man? Woman? Child, you think?"

"No way to tell."

“We need to get back and tend to Hadrian.”

“Yeah,” Dru said, collecting her thoughts.

Hadrian was babbling when they went to retrieve him. Roman inflated a desalination bag, filled it with stagnant water, then heaved it out into the sun to start evaporation. While the hulk’s interior was humid and hot, Roman had the idea to lay Hadrian half-submerged in the shallow brack. Removing and wetting the scientist’s shirt, they draped it across his chest in a desperate attempt to cool him. Feverish, Hadrian shivered, teeth clacking with an intolerable sound.

“He’s really hot,” Roman said, his palm over Hadrian’s twitchy forehead. “We need to do something else.”

“What, Roman?” Dru said, exasperated. “This ship is corroded and ancient. There's nothing here. And we have no light to search.”

“I have an idea.”

Roman pulled out his radio from his backpack and detached a cylindrical capsule from its side. Cracking the release safety, he squeezed a trigger and activated it. A harsh electric beep echoed as a blinding red strobe pulsed from a fish-eye lens.

“It’s the emergency beacon. It transmits a high energy short wave locator pulse, but it also signals visually, probably a feature intended for use on the shadoward icecap. The battery

should last a few hours.”

“I know what it is, Roman. I had to convince Hadrian not to activate it.” Dru grabbed it and jostled it in her hand. “It must weigh a kilo or two. Why did you keep it?”

“I thought we’d get back to a place where it would make sense to trigger it.”

“Not very likely now. I’m sorry, Roman.”

Dru caught Roman’s sullen face in the red strobe. He was young, a boy. And as such, imminent mortality was mere abstraction. He hadn’t yet reconciled with the reality of their impossible situation.

“So, use this as a torch then?” she asked, an attempt to change the mood. “Can I switch it off to save the battery?”

Roman shook his head. “One time use.”

“So, it’s done after this. Junk.”

“Junk.”

“Can I stop it from strobing?”

Roman shrugged. “Don’t think so.”

She panned the dark to reveal the ornate textures of the hulk’s hibernation bays. The grainy shadows were transformed into red pulsing mechanical patterns, commingled with a mantle of corrosion and oxidized detail. Dru found it psychedelic. She felt meek and insignificant, overwhelmed by mosaics of

grotesquery as she stood within the innards of the interstellar leviathan.

“Exploring this place is dangerous. And what would I be looking for? And what do we really need? …besides everything,” Dru lamented.

“Like blood, this ship survived in deep space on coolant and the heat exchangers that pumped it. There might be a few components still intact in the wreckage, sealed hermetic spares, what not… Look for pressure cylinders and liquid cooling manifolds. L’Estelo Mangus was built to last thousands of years. Maybe some of it survived the crash. If there’s any pressure or chemistry left, it could be used to cool, freeze a little water in a damp cloth maybe.”

Dru sighed. Such a notion seemed hopeless. Sinister’s polar region was just too humid and hot. Thermodynamics would catch up with them all soon like crustaceans in a slow cooker.

She held the strobe out and crept into the hulk’s deeper recesses. At the end of the hibernation bay, the hull narrowed into a radial collection of railings that converged on a central hub. A few custodial robots dangled from their carts, frozen in a futile to-and-fro as they prepared passenger pods for an awakening that never happened. Dru clambered over more debris and headed for a set of rickety gantries. The metal groaned as

she put her full weight on its rails and started to climb. The strobe gave her vertigo, the flash-stills forcing her brain to interpolate the intervals. Going was slow. She fought her senses, guiding her movements by feel rather than sight.

After a minute, Dru's legs trembled as she tried to balance, until at last, she reached the hub. The hub functioned as a bulkhead portal, a gateway for the custodial robots to enter the hulk's deeper recesses. One of the robots had been crushed by the constricting sphincter door, no doubt a victim of the malfunctioning chaos upon impact. Serving as a jam, the crunched machine allowed Dru to wiggle past, crouching down and contorting her shoulders.

Once through, a twisted hallway continued on. The tunnel bent gradually upward. A functional zero gravity space, the walls were all similar to each other with no intentional floor or ceiling. Latched panels crowded every surface. They looked like storage lockers, each labeled with an symbolic code. Dru grasped the walls to steady herself. Rotated over, the hallway formed an intersecting 'V' that forced her to waddle. Ducking and weaving, she negotiated the limp arms of another custodial robot, bled dry of its hydraulic fluid centuries ago. One of its arms clacked against a panel as she brushed past, making a hollow 'clank'. She stopped to inspect.

The panel latch was made for the robots' multi-tooled manipulator, and as such it had no hand holds. She fiddled with the mechanism, but it'd seized over the centuries. Using her knife, she picked at it but to no avail; the latch was frozen. The internal pins, tumblers, and bolts were no doubt all corroded into one oxidized lump. Dru gave up and moved on.

Ahead, she saw a panel ajar. The remains of a still-attached mechanical arm stuck out into the hallway. Dru looked about for the arm's owner but saw nothing. For all she knew, it belonged to the crumbled doorstop lodged back at the sphincter. The salt air and humidity weren't as bad here, the composites and alloys in far better shape. One panel was loose enough that Dru could dig her fingernails into the seal to get a grip. With a heave, she dislodged it with a crack.

Inside were the remnants of a personal locker. Several boxes sat stacked inside, each individualized with the panel's exterior code. Several vials held a dried residue. Each had an injection nipple made to couple to a hose fitting. The glass vessels were arranged on a swing tray that presumably allowed the robots easy access. Despite the Old Esperanto, Dru was able to decipher the labeling.

"Medications, hormones, supplements…"

Each passenger had their prescriptions slowly dripped into

them while in fugue. The robots were automated flight nurses, dosing their living cargo to maintain biologies spanning an eon. The lockers were all the baggage anyone was allowed, a tiny storage space on their light years journey into the unknown. Dru removed one of the boxes and opened the latch. Inside were personal items, sentimental trinkets from lives back home. Inside a vacuum sealed bag was a thin stack of photographs. She tore it open and exposed the glossy prints to Sinister's atmosphere.

Most of the photos were gatherings of family and friends, holidays, weddings, etc… Dru remembered seeing photos from the homeworld, but they were mostly landscapes and buildings. This locker belonged to a young girl, in her late teens or early twenties. In all the pictures, she was smiling, a genuine broad smile. The less intimate photos, however, piqued Dru's interest more. The red strobe, with its relentless intermittent monochrome, made studying the photographs laborious. However, she was transfixed.

One photo was of a cityscape in darkness, a vastly larger city than anything on Sinister. Buildings, streets, and vehicles looked like stars. Even with the sun gone, the world appeared warm. So warm in fact, the people carried on much as they did in sunlight. The idea of ever-changing sunlight, Dro found hard to

grasp. Another photo was of an orangish sun hovering just above an endless horizon of agitated water, palm trees bent slightly in the foreground. In silhouette, a couple sat entwined on a beach in swimming suits.

“Why did they leave?”

On Sinister, all buildings were defined by their position in relation to the static sun. Bedrooms were on the shadowside and living areas sunward. Roofs were pitched in such a way that overhangs sculpted shade with precision. Tinted windows were either built for direct or indirect light, specific to the slant of the solar rays. And all homes were in thermal equilibrium, always.

The chaos of living with a sun perpetually on the move, Dru found bizarre. Did homes need constantly oscillating climate systems? Did they have to reposition and reconfigure all the windows all the time? Was the lighting always turning off and on? What if the electricity went off —as it does— did everyone in those massive cities move about like blind insects in a hive?

She knew the homeworld had planet-sized salt water lakes called oceans, but Dru never considered such abstractions until now. The last photo was the girl on the deck of a waterborne vessel. Blue sky met the churning water’s deep indigo, the hazy outline of an island in the distance. Sinister had static

versions of such things —the shadow-ward ice sheets and the bleached Salis Majora— but nothing ‘animated’. Dru remembered learning how the homeworld’s oceans isolated civilizations for millennia, like miniature interstellar voids. And when they finally managed to link up, crossing the expanse in their primitive ships, all hell broke loose.

After thousands of years in isolation, the ancient homeworlders’ precarious cultures were upended, their realities shattered in an instant when strangers —strengthened by the crucible of time— imposed themselves, inadvertently or adversarially. The subtle intrigue of Vespan and Tigan diplomacy paled in comparison to those epic clashes of antiquity: plagues, genocide, enslavement, total war.

Dru tucked the photographs into her rucksack and went through the remaining items: a timepiece, some vials with water and sand, a wind-up device with earphones attached, a hermetic envelope carrying documents and data discs —which she decided not to take. Worried about the strobe battery, she quickly went through another box and found clothing and jewelry. Impatient, she crammed it all into her bulging rucksack and moved on.

Up ahead, she came upon a junction. Four hallways branched at right angles, terminating in identical hatches. Dru grabbed a set of handholds near the wall and climbed up. The handholds

were designed for zero gravity, leaving Dru to wonder about their sturdiness. Mindful of her weight, She timidly reached the hatch. It was hopelessly sealed. She climbed back down and tried the lateral hatches; the same. Wary of the climb down, she thought better of the lower hatch and continued down the main corridor.

Something blocked her way.

“Hello, old friend.”

Lodged in the passage was a clump of The Rip’s featureless bubbles. While ubiquitous outside, in the confines of the hulk, they were a claustrophobic menace. The spheres had been so infrequent as of late, to find one buried inside —in the dark— startled her. Like a bad omen, the shapes gave her a shiver even in the hulk’s stagnant heat.

Sighing, Dru retreated to the interchange and made for the lower hatch. The drop wasn’t much, but thoughts of slipping and injuring herself gave her pause. A sprained ankle, or a twisted knee and the expedition was over, everything except a slow death. And thanks to Delfino and Ludoviko, She no longer had her pistol to mercifully end it.

Dru set her rucksack down, climbed into the shaft, dangled from a handhold, then dropped. Upon impact, the hatch cracked loose from its bulkhead. Using her right leg as a battering ram,

she stomped until the hatch broke free and fell away into the darkness. Carefully, she crawled in and lowered herself, then dropped to the dim floor below.

Upon landing, her footing slipped, and she fell flat onto her chest. Face to the floor, she looked through metal grating that hid intricate networks of hoses, pipes, and wiring bundles. Dust was thick and coated everything. Nothing hurt —no obvious damage — so she rose to her feet and looked about. This was a maintenance tunnel. But unlike the corridor above, this space was for humans not robots. Valves, handles, and service panes were for biological hands, not mechanical clamps or claws. The black screens of terminal stations interrupted the ducts, keypads and flip switches, all labeled for human eyes.

Not knowing where she was going, or what exactly she was looking for, she set off into the confusing maze. While attempting to mentally map the twists and turns, she soon gave up; she was completely lost. Holding in panic, she tried to remember her route, but frayed nerves and shallow concentration made it impossible.

“By Baphomet’s hand, I’m going to die here. The light’s going to go out and I’m going to be scurrying like a crazed animal.”

She started to hum, a slow rhythmic breathing that gave her focus. She was disoriented, but she had time. After a minute,

the adrenaline flooding her brain subsided. Think, she had to think, but what to do?

"Up. If I keep going up…"

The tunnels and access ducts branched everywhere, but a methodical commitment to ascent would reduce ambiguity. Beyond several anxiety-inducing bottlenecks of vent piping, she found herself in a large circular shaft with numbers printed on the far side.

"'Station' six."

The shaft was tipped at an angle. Like the starship's other passageways, the walls were outfitted with zero gravity handholds. Dru climbed up, each movement timed to the beacon's strobe now strapped to her belt. As she worked her way past 'station' seven and eight, she noticed a faint light high above. A thin column of white penetrated the black, its extent enhanced by motes of dust. She saw the crack in the hull from which it emanated; how far away, it was hard to tell.

Worry ebbed, reinvigorating her concentration. But another layer of anxiety surfaced. She'd been spelunking through the hulk for nearly an hour, and she'd had nothing but a rucksack of artifacts to show for it. She was supposed to be helping Hadrian, but her curiosity led her astray. She wasn't an engineer or a scientist, and Roman's carrying on about the need

to create ‘exothermic reactions’ just made her feel dumb.

“Damn it, Roman.”

Two stations below the light, Dru reached a platform, protruding into the shaft. She could see the outline of a pressure door. The portal was anodized, smooth, and free of the hulk’s oppressive dust. With no corrosion, it looked fresh, direct from the homeworld factories.

“Airlock,” Dru read the Old Esperanto printed on the door.

A nearby cove panel, configured with a console of buttons, levers, and a dark display screen, controlled the door. Below, an access grate hid the airlock’s plumbing. Dru gave it a swift kick, knocking the flimsy metal loose to expose the weave of mesh-clad pneumatic tubing. With another tap of her foot, she knocked the grate into the shaft. Endless seconds of free fall, then the clank, as it ricocheted further into the black. If the hulk’s spirits weren’t roused, they were now.

Dru kneeled to take a look. Several cylinders, all attached to the hoses, ran through a manifold into the main door. Dru tried to release the fittings, but the grease had long turned to cement. To properly remove the tanks required the skills of a mechanical archaeologist with exotic tools. Instead, she pulled out her knife and sawed through the corrugated flex hose. A hiss of air blew dust into her face. The hose, by some miracle, held

pressure. The airlock door pushed back from its seal with a groan, then screeched open half a meter.

The chamber beyond inhaled with a whoosh. The room had been at vacuum. She gained a newfound respect for the black magic of the homeworld engineers. She cut the other tanks' hoses. The door budged slightly then seized. The opening, however, was wide enough for Dru to squeeze through.

The chamber was small but pristine, except a drift of dust blown in from the outside. Absent air, the room and its contents were immune to rot, fungus, and the pernicious atmosphere with its host of microorganisms. Three closets with glass doors held spacesuits, all looked new and unused. Dru opened one with ease. Tucked up against the suit were coils of rigging, a harness system for exterior work. Each forearm was kitted with bulky gloves, inset with nozzles near the palms for zero-gravity mobility. A set of decals with printed instructions detailed suit operations. The helmet was attached to a backpack recessed into the closet. An array of buttons and toggles hinted at a suit activation procedure. Nearby was a rocker switch with the universal 'on'/'off' symbol and a mention of hydrogen, or some other chemical. Curious, she flipped the switch.

A soft rush of fluids and gasses squeaked within unseen components. In disbelief, Dru watched thin white lights fill the

closet with a sterile glow. She turned away and shielded her eyes. The red strobe soon dimmed, outshined by the closet lights. A constellation of blue, red, and yellow status diodes, along with the climate control's impeller whirl, announced the suit's resurrection. In awe, Dru had lost track of time.

"I've got to get back."

The light in the shaft came from a rusty hole leading outside, not much larger than her fist. She leaned out over the abyss to poke the gap with her knife. While filled with rotten metal, Dru saw no way to dig it out. She quickly gave up and went back into the airlock to inspect the room. The exterior door she assumed was frozen shut. She looked at the red and white 'safety' hash around the bulkhead. A set of fine-printed instructions was posted next to the door release controls. Dru tried to read it.

"In case of emergency…"

Instructions detailed the release mechanism, explaining how to 'erupt' or 'burst' the latches using 'fire' with a separate handle but no hints on how to activate it. She slid her hand over the door's jam and around the bulbous glass of warning lights. A hidden handle or lever had to be somewhere. Dru stopped to think.

"Careful, Druscilla. You've come this far."

She searched the suit closets, and used one of the safety

belays with a few meters of slack to secure herself to a nearby rail. Next to it was what she'd been looking for, a yellow-and-black handhold, and emergency grip with the word 'escape' printed above it.

"There we go," she said, grabbing the handle tight.

She yanked the grip and pulled. The sickly honk of a malfunctioning siren blasted the room, so loud it swirled the dust. Three explosive charges blew the door partially clear, while a fourth bolt misfired. But the door was heavy enough that gravity did the rest. The door teetered until at last, it sheared and fell to reveal the blinding desert outside. She dug into her rucksack for her sun goggles.

Tens of meters up, Dru had a commanding view of the crash site. Another section of the hulk —more extensively damaged— lay half a kilometer in the distance. Beyond that, a debris field stretched to the horizon. In the haze she spotted more sections, no doubt jettisoned and landed autonomously prior to impact. Amongst it all was the specular scatter of The Rip.

She leaned out the door and looked aftward, noticing the breach they'd entered a few hundred meters away. Her chthonic journey felt like kilometers. Perception was deceiving however, and the hulk had her spun about. Exhausted and thirsty, Dru sat and dangled her legs out the airlock. She'd no water left and

her mouth was parched; yelling hurt. Too tired to rig up a belay, she closed her eyes and let an anemic breeze cool her.

“Hello?”

The voice was distant.

“Roman!” Dru yelled.

He walked over and stood below but didn’t look up. He’d noticed the fallen door but hadn’t made the connection.

“Roman!” she shouted again.

He spun about, confused. She yelled again.

“There you are,” he said, finally looking up. “I was starting to worry. How did you get all the way up there? And the door…”

“Long story.”

“Did you find anything?”

“The motherlode.”

CHAPTER EIGHT: THE LICHEN

Dru shook the vial of sand and read the label. The writing wasn't Old Esperanto; the alphabet was different and she didn't recognize it. The grains were beige with bits of black mixed with white fragments. From the photos, she guessed it was from a beach. While not a geologist, the sand within wasn't like anything she'd seen.

"Eeh… puh… nee… muh," Dru said, sounding out the word.

"What did you say?" Roman said, studying the photographs.

"It's where the sand came from… maybe a beach. Probably where these photos were taken," Dru said, putting the vial down and picking up another filled with liquid. The water was clear

except for a few wisps of sediment.

"Uht… laan… tick," she said, sounding out the label. "The sea, or ocean, I guess."

"She'samazing," Roman said, gazing at the photos. "Like no one I've seen. There's those isolated Tigan colonies speaking the old dialect —they sort of have similar eyes— but this girl…"

"Don't get too worked up, Roman. That girl's been rotting in this wreck for nearly a thousand years," Dru quipped. "The passengers of L'Estelo Magnus were from all over the homeworld. When they finally arrived on Sinister, they just… washed out genetically."

"But Tigans look different from Vespans."

"A little. But compared to that photo of that girl and her friends?"

"—The wedding photo?"

Dru nodded.

Roman flipped through the stack until he found it, then took a closer look.

"Look at the man next to her, I think it's her boyfriend," he said, pointing at the photograph. "The eyes and the hair, and his skin… so different. I wonder how they met."

"He might be entombed here too. Dark skies mixed with light, oceans, billions of people —all different— the homeworld was

everything Sinister isn’t: static, sparse, mostly dead.”

Roman lingered on the photo and the romantic couple in the picture.

“Druscilla?”

“Yes, Roman,” she replied, idly swishing the vial of sea water, hypnotized.

“Did you kiss Delfino when you went off together?”

Dru, taken aback by the radioman’s audacity, paused then spoke. “That’s none of your business.”

“Well, considering he robbed us and kidnapped Milius, it’s a bit of my business,” Roman said, sardonically.

“Fair.”

“So?”

“He tricked me. I can at least admit it,” Dru answered. “But I’ve made mistakes in the past. Wouldn’t be my first.”

“Like Cato?” Roman asked, referring to the late expedition medic Dru had shared a bunk with for a few wakes.

“No. Cato was alright,” Dru replied, annoyed by the presumption.

“I noticed your banter with Delfino at the oasis, even though I couldn’t understand what you were saying. It was obvious you liked him.”

Dru shrugged.

“But why Delfino? I couldn’t figure it out.”

“Different, I guess,” Dru replied, uncomfortable with Roman’s prying. “You have to be tough out here. And it makes other parts of you fragile, I suppose.”

Roman nodded.

She hadn’t thought much about the reasons, but it was an honest answer. Tigans were few in Novum Pax, a handful of diplomats, embassy administrators, a scattering of visiting academics, and their families. Being half-Tigan, Dru always felt like an outsider. A champion fencer and harpastum player, Dru used athletics to assert herself and overcome bias and prejudice. But it wasn’t enough to stop others from calling her a ‘Vegan’, half-Vespan and half-Tigan, a pejorative double-entendre.

So meeting a Tigan, even one under such dire and extraordinary circumstances, stirred a dormant attraction. Something exotic and taboo was evoked by speaking Tigan to another man, a language most often used by her mother to bark chores at her and Ava. And despite Delfino’s subterfuge, Dru couldn’t help but think some honesty lay at the heart of his charm.

“Well, I know why he liked you,” Roman offered.

“Roman, he didn’t like me,” Dru said, shaking her head. “He—”

“—I mean, I understand. You’re beautiful, so…” Roman said, the

word dribbling from his mouth in a muddled whisper.

An awkward silence followed, interrupted by a slight hiss from a whining impeller and a weak breeze from outside. Dru quickly changed the subject.

“Did you figure out that device? The one with the earphones?”

Roman picked up the tiny metal box with the wind up handle. “I’ll tinker and see what I can make of it.”

They used the airlock as shelter. Hadrian’s delirium left him incapacitated. Rigging a climbing pitch with harnesses and a belay, they hoisted the scientist into the airlock. The ordeal exhausted them. Extricating the suits from the closet proved straightforward, but converting it to ‘idle mode’ was another matter. The instructions specified a ‘sequenced conversion’, but deciphering the old script was impossible.

The suits were intact, but not impervious to the effects of time. Their internal workings proved an unstable equilibrium. They gently laid out all three on the airlock floor, careful to extend the attached cords and hoses as not to kink. The first suit ran for a few minutes then died. Some jiggering and power cycling kicked it back into operation, but only temporarily. After half a dozen attempts, they abandoned it.

The second suit was more stable. With care, they’d slipped it over Hadrian’s slight frame, unlatching the gloves, boots, and

neck fittings then sealing them again. Despite Dru's mothering, he remained delusional and combative, risking the suit's integrity. Dru administered a sedative from the remains of her medical kit. After a frustrating hour, they'd finally fitted the scientist, minus the helmet.

Dru reread the suit's climate control instructions. Using the forearm's control panel, she adjusted its temperature to a constant eighteen degrees. Its blue glowing thermometer held steady. Condensate pooled under the heat exchanger coils; it was working. Dru removed a small notebook she'd kept in her rucksack, then stuffed it, and put it under Hadrian's head. Soon he was asleep, his body cooling.

"Too bad we can't trade places with him," Roman said. He looked at the remaining suit. "What about the extra? We could take turns?"

"Too risky. Hadrian's rig could go at any time. It's already starting to make a funny noise, one of the pumps, an impeller maybe, not sure," Dru said.

She sat down cross-legged, back against the metal wall, and flipped through the notebook's warped pages. The notebook was meant to be found if none of them returned alive. A record. In it was a log of the lost, Marcus, Cato, the rest… Each had a small eulogy along with the circumstances of their demise: the

how’s, the when’s, and the where’s. Ava’s eulogy, however, was blank. Nebulous platitudes, a comforting character sketch, none of that would suffice, and she wouldn’t have wanted it. Ava was defiant, bold, stubborn, polarizing, words her sister would no doubt have used to describe Dru if circumstance had flipped. She turned to a clean page and readied an entry for Hadrian. Unlike the other expedition volunteers, Hadrian was a generation older, a man with a family –in theory– including grandchildren; they deserved something, she supposed.

He’d mentioned a mid-life ‘experimental period’ when he underwent a transformation. On sabbatical with the Black Rainbow society, he’d spent time among the kinocoriums of the twilight districts, guided psychonaut tours of psilocybin strains in the confines of deprivation tanks. The experience was supposed to deliver an academic transcendence , like a shaman or a Capricornian priest. His neural pathways would open to the discovery of a new gravity drive or some exotic field theory, but none of that happened. When he returned, his wife divorced him, remarrying an oligarch whom she’d previously had an affair with. Only his son, a fellow physicist, continued to speak to him, mostly in a professional manner. Relationships with collaborators went foul, and his science stagnated. His career was on its last legs.

Dru put pencil to paper, trying to muster a respectful word, but quickly gave up. Stubborn and boorish, Hadrian would most likely recover, and she wasn't about to waste the energy. She tucked the notebook back into her jumpsuit and stared at Hadrian, wrapped up like a sleeping baby.

"I'm going to try the radio soon. Up this high and with all this metal, it might help reception."

"Fine."

Dru got up and laid out their supplies to take stock. They were still able to desalinate and replenish their water, but it tasted funny. She suspected algae or fungus in the desalinator's filter, not enough to sicken them, but more of a foul taste. The less they drank however, the more they risked dehydration and ending up like Hadrian. Food was also getting critical. They were down to the last handfuls of the dried mix. Since the Tigan's had stolen their sodium stove, they soaked the legumes and fortified grains in a waterproof bag, softening them to eat. In spite of Roman's reassurances, the salted isopod bordered on fetid. Dru had consumed the most palatable pemmican first, leaving the discolored and smellier bits. Now the smell was sulfur-like and the flesh slimy. She suspected its microscopic parasites had started to rot. Other than a rogue salt angel, they were too far sunward to hunt or harvest protein.

"We're starving, Roman," Dru admitted.

"I know," he said, setting up the radio.

"Should we even bother with the Nexus? " Dru wondered. "Milius, Delfino, and that damned Ludoviko, they're probably dead by now."

"They've all our provisions. They should be better off."

Dru shrugged. "But the Tigans weren't prepared for the Salis Majora. They didn't know what they were doing –you saw them at the oasis," Dru said. "They were mad, half-crazed."

"Hardly their fault. The accident at the lake, the lack of water, and that spider attack… They were victims of bad luck. It's hard to gauge their true survivability –Delfino told you the whole story –weren't you paying attention? "

"That story churned my stomach. Delfino's retelling was too macabre; I couldn't listen. And worst, it seemed fabricated. Something was off. Things just didn't add up."

"Like what?"

Dru shrugged. "Not sure. I haven't figured it out just yet."

Roman looked at her but said nothing.

"Maybe they did all break through the lake," Dru continued. "And maybe the whole lightning thing was true, but Delfino never mentioned what happened to the other survivors, specifically Pacjo and their attache officer Johano. He mentioned they were

mad from thirst and became violent, but that was it."

"And then their 'spider' story…"

"—Roman, no one was attacked by a salis arachnid."

"But what about his wound?"

"He was inspired by that robot we stumbled upon, or one like it. That machine couldn't have injured him like that. I think his wounds came from the other Tigans. I think Delfino and Ludoviko killed the other two survivors."

"Why?"

"Not sure, maybe desperation," Dru replied.

However, Dru wasn't sure if Delfino's version was the truth or a warped version of it. Maybe the two had intentionally led their companions onto the lake's thinning crust. Delfino alleged he knew cartography and geology; he was the Tigan mapmaker after all. But why? Dru reasoned their expedition may've had very different goals. Kidnapping Milius indicated an ulterior motive, but Urbo's agents were more logical, pragmatic.

"Will we find them?"

Dane gazed out over the washed-out flats. "I'm not sure we should find them," she replied.

"But Milius?"

She shrugged.

A week had passed since the oasis. Dru tried to remember

Milius –his mannerisms, his voice– but besides the black orb lodged in his skull, memories were few. Hadrian's retelling of Milius's traumatic past had stuck with her, and she could only wonder if his mother's factitious disorder was genetic; if he'd had the same predilections. A part of her didn't want to bother with The Nexus, but she didn't want to return home either. And as the hours and wakes wore on, she thought about Milius less and less. Dru felt the present moment more than ever, and with it, an ambivalence for most things.

"We can't just abandon him," Roman pleaded.

Not wanting to stir Roman's passions, she obfuscated her lack of emotion with ambiguity, hoping he would leave her alone.

"We'll scrounge around the crash site, then we'll have a go at the Nexus," she said. With what resources, she wasn't sure, but it was a plan.

The second suit lasted another hour then gave out. No puffs of smoke or electrical sparks, the lights just dimmed and it stopped making noise. Roman had set up an improvised catch basin from the helmet visor to collect the drip of fuel cell condensation. While warm as tea, the water was pure and clean to drink. Hadrian grew lucid but was still suffering.

The third suit failed to power up at all, hissing gas from a manifold. Roman managed to replace a failing hydrogen seal by

cannibalizing the other suit. It finally kicked on but was plagued with a chorus of electronic warning and error beeps. The result was an underpowered climate system. While an improvement over the desert's ambient thirty-five celsius, it struggled to hold twenty two degrees. Hadrian, more in control of his faculties, was able to zip himself in with help, but the wild fluctuations made him uncomfortable. After Dru and Roman managed a few hours sleep, they woke to Hadrian sitting up and drinking water. Hair frayed, eyes sunken and wide, he looked weathered but determined.

"A room with a view, eh?" Hadrian said, looking out the airlock door at the endless desert. "I assume breakfast will be brought up from the galley soon?"

"How do you feel?" Dru asked.

"I no longer see ghosts and demons, which means my fever's abated. I also don't feel like vomiting, but that presumes I've something in my stomach to vomit."

"We're not doing too great in that department."

Hadrian nodded.

The third suit finally gave out. But unlike the first, its end was more spectacular. An internal coupler broke and filled it with a liquid refrigerant that either scalded Hadrian or froze his skin. He hopped up, ripped the hoses free from the closet,

and danced about. The airlock filled with his wild howls as fog expanded from the coolant system. Roman and Dru tried not to laugh –it was harmless enough– but Hadrian saw it otherwise.

"It's not funny! I could've been killed," Hadrian scolded, tearing himself free.

"That suit saved your life, Hadrian. Be kind to it. Especially considering it traveled light years to get here –to this exact place– and still had the courtesy to function."

They spent the next hours preparing to set off. Roman had calculated a better bearing. From his estimate, The Nexus was a week or two away, assuming their current pace. However, their current pace was falling off rapidly. And having no idea what they would find when they got there, Dru was unsure. She was certain of one thing however, it wouldn't be the salvation they sought.

"It's working," Roman said, a smile on his face as he played with the relic's earphones. He wound it up and pushed a metal button. "This is really strange…"

"What is that?" Hadrian got up to take a look.

"Sounds from the homeworld."

They passed the device around. Less eager, Dru waited her turn, then somewhat reluctantly stuck in the earphones. Its thirty second soundscapes were familiar yet alien. One clip was

rain dripping on vegetation, but it was an unreal deluge. The chorus of animals carrying on over the storm was truly extraordinary, chirps of insects, howls that sounded human but weren't. Layers of barking and warbling evoked a biome of massive diversity. So many creatures existing on top of one another, Dru shuddered imagining the throngs.

She clicked the button and heard a rhythmic whoosh with muted screeches. In the foreground were people speaking an alien language. She'd never heard anyone talk she couldn't understand. The babble was babyish.

"The wave noises… are you listening to that one?" Roman asked her.

"I guess so."

"Weird, huh? The next one's really something."

Dru clicked the button again. A cacophony of whirs, hisses, sirens, horns, shouts, and talking inundated her ears. The sounds were amplified and multiplied, auditoriums of people blended with incessant factory clangor. So much and so vast, the clip was the definition of noise itself.

"What is all that?"

"It's a city. I'm almost certain."

The nighttime cityscape photos, and their serene arrays of light, betrayed the actual din. Hearing the bustle of an ancient

metropolis overwhelmed her. Dru thought of a massive hive, its insects supplanted with human beings. To live in such chaos, the anxiety alone… With Sinister's finite boundaries, civilization had coalesced within the liminal. The inclination to spread out and settle, like an exploding fractal, was shunted. L'Estelo Magnus's pioneers had been relegated to the narrowest of latitudes. Vast cities —so bizarre and wondrous— were impossible.

The rest of the recordings were mundane, conversations and interviews, outdoor sounds but more spare than before. She removed the earphones and handed the device back to Roman. Keeping her thoughts to herself, she said little.

"Her name is Maria, I think," Roman said, looking at the photograph of the smiling girl.

"How can you tell?" Hadrian asked.

"Those recordings… Her voice is always close to the microphone, and people keep asking her questions. '<u>Maria</u>… <u>Maria</u>… They're older. Maybe her mom or an aunt?"

"No one's thought of that girl in a thousand years until you came along, Roman. A rare gift you gave her. If we could all be so lucky," Dru said, getting up to sort gear in preparation to vacate their bivouac.

"Lucky," Roman replied, confused. "She never made it, Dru. She

died here in this empty place.”

Dru’s sense of cosmic justice was calibrated beyond Roman’s reference frame. Maria —or whomever— hadn’t died on Sinister’s sunward pole when the hulk had crashed; she failed to wake. Dying in the desert wasn’t a passive undertaking. Fate wouldn’t allow them to forgo its unpleasantness. Here, death was an ordeal.

Roman carried on listening to the device, lulled by the indecipherable banter of Maria and her family. Dru knew the sounds, having grown up with them, the mundane back-and-forth of parents and her sisters. But as an orphan, the radioman found the conversations alien. Conversations of no importance to Dru, but like music itself to Roman. He kept the device —wanton to give it up— tucking it into his jumpsuit like a keepsake.

Before departing for the Nexus, they made plans to search the rest of the crash site. The extensively damaged —nearly obliterated— sister hulk was a short walk away. A more treacherous structure, they’d need vigilance and energy, energy they lacked. Movement would have to be efficient and deliberate. Then they’d have to cross to the distant intact sections, another hour or more away.

They repelled down to the desert floor and recovered what they could from the belay rig. To keep Hadrian ambulatory, they

relieved him of sled duty and split the contents of his pack. The second hulk section was less intact, more spread out and broken. Dulled by erosion, the ship hid massive fire damage. Its exteriors were brittle and weak, the weight of its frame had collapsed in on itself. Unlike the cavernous hibernation bays, the larger compartments had lost integrity.

“It’s a shambles,” Hadrian said, stopping to sip from his canteen. “So much of the lower hull is destroyed, it’s hard to see if there’s a worthwhile route into it.”

“Can’t tell. Just shadows this far out. We’ll need to get a little closer. One side is definitely more damaged than the other. It looks like the retro-rocket exploded and tore free of its gimbal. Look. See that mound a few hundred meters away?” Dru pointed to a hill of undifferentiated rust. “That must be where it ended up.”

“Quite a sight when this all came down.”

The approach was more fraught. Ancient metal and pinnacles of salt crust ringed the starship wreckage like a phalanx. Hadrian noticed the seracs were actually crystals of dizziness complexity. Roman walked closer and inspected. He touched a spiraling branch of the formations and recoiled. A few drops of red welled from his fingertips.

“They’re like razors,” Roman said, sucking his wounds.

“Why did you touch it? It’s probably full of rust or toxic bacteria.”

Dru took out her knife and knocked away the needles, revealing a smoother base underneath. Each crystal clump was the size and shape of a narrow pine tree. The formations stemmed from hexagonal trunks rooted in the debris of shredded alloys. Very old, Hadrian guessed they’d started to grow immediately after the crash. A unique aggregation of ionized salt air, and other crystals of inorganic chemistry, clung to the hulk’s wreckage. The result was a fantastical sculpture garden.

“I’ll try to knock a path in. Be careful not to fall. A quick infection from a cut and that’ll be the end of you,” Dru said, stepping past Roman with her knife.

Beyond the crystals, they found themselves not quite inside, yet not quite outside. Roman managed to rig one of the spacesuit’s external lamps and wire it to his radio’s solar batteries. The intensity was poor, but it was consistent, a far cry from the annoying beacon strobe. They abandoned the sled, and skirted the rents and overhangs while peering into the dim unknown. A slough of brine made for sloppy going. Wading through one of the inundated trenches, Hadrian shouted and pointed into the darkness.

“What is it?” Dru shouted back.

“The cavity, it opens up inside. With the light, it’s hard to tell. But I see something.”

The pool of brack got deeper, and the sludge below grabbed their feet. Up to their chest, if the water went any higher they'd have to find another way.

“The water’s hot, really warm.”

“I can barely pull my feet free.”

“Just a little further. Keep going.”

They entered the hull's interior. The water was nearly to their armpits when they reached a dry ledge formed from a buckled bulkhead. One at a time, they climbed out. The pool’s sediment coated their boots and shoes. The color was a mix of sickly blue interspersed with red and black flakes. Whatever the mud was, it irritated the skin. Swishing their feet in the surface water rinsed it away, but the itching persisted. The toxic chemicals of L’Estelo Magnus hadn’t leached away over the centuries, but instead persisted, coalescing and clinging to the wreckage.

Propped up by crumpled superstructure, the punctured and peppered metal hull formed a ceiling of dappled twilight. A honeycomb of broken and scattered containers filled the jumbled interiors. Unlike the other hulk section, this unit was devoted to cargo transport. However, the containers were kitted with

life support systems, not something Dru would've expected for standard cargo. While a range of sizes, the hexagonal cells looked wieldy enough to manhandle. Each storage unit was equipped with a coupler port for coolant and electricity, so corroded now they were hardly unrecognizable. Most were crushed by the collapsed storage racks which held them, their contents spilled and dissolved into a mineralized conglomerate. Dru picked at a pile with her knife, but her efforts revealed nothing. Further in, a teetering bulkhead held racks of still-intact containers. Roman panned his light over the crates. Most had no damage, their integrity sustained despite the impact and the caustic environment.

"What do you think's in them?" Dru wondered.

"Hard to say," Hadrian replied. "Could be anything, really. There's only a few transfers of the original manifest from The Crossing. If memory serves –which it hasn't recently– I recall the core payloads were dedicated to organic terraforming materials. Some were deployed effectively on Sinister, while others were not. The challenge of The Crossing was not just the expanse, but the very real possibility the destination star system could yield nothing habitable: poor gravity, impossible temperatures, a crushing and unbreathable atmosphere. Knowing a new Eden was impossible, they equipped L'Estelo Magnus with pre-

engineered species that could take to marginal worlds."

"A marginal world like Sinister," Roman added.

"Sinister may be a 'bountiful' world considering the multitude of alternatives. We just don't know."

Dru led them through the tumult to get a closer look, then climbed the honeycomb scaffold to inspect. She scraped away mold to find a few identifying marks, but the symbolic code was indecipherable. If they wanted to know what was inside, they'd have to crack the crates open. Climbing back down, Dru caught Roman and Hadrian staring at something.

"Shine it over there, then switch off the light," Hadrian told Roman.

Roman did as he was told. Dru noticed the glow, organic patterns of orange, yellow, and purple. Hadrian mentioned 'bioluminescence', specific genes carried by species that caused them to glow in the dark. These were lichens, a crude simple plant, re-engineered to survive hostile worlds with weak atmospheres. Spilled from the hulk's containers, the lichen had dispersed throughout the wreck.

"Their glow makes it possible to identify and track their lineage to homeworld species. It also traces DNA if the lichen could intermingle with native compatible genetics. But it didn't work on Sinister. It's all a bit of a jumble now," Hadrian

explained.

"Why?"

Hadrian stepped into a shaft of sunlight and looked into the white. "I suppose the engineers didn't envision a world without darkness, did they?"

Roman shrugged.

"I'm going to pull a crate down. Help me lower it."

Dru lashed a simple rig using the recovered belay and lowered down a mid-size crate. A few blows to the latches with her knife hilt and its shell popped loose. The alkaline air had penetrated the crate. But despite the deterioration, its contents were identifiable. Miniature pods lined the bottom, each married to a set of glassware. The liquid and microscopic specimens within, however, had long withered away.

"Embryos?" Hadrian guessed. "But I'm no biologist."

"There's words here. Look." Roman pointed to a faint but legible engraving.

Dru scrubbed away the mold and deciphered a few words. She saw 'rano', an Old Esperanto word that seemed familiar –a creature– however she couldn't place it. There were also mentions of 'waterborne' and 'landborne', or 'amphibious'. With her knife she cracked the hinges and opened the container. A pile of twig-like bones –an impossible puzzle– lay within. She recognized a

skull, a broad and arrowhead shaped bone with oversized sockets that once held massive eyes. Hadrian unapologetically took the container from Dru and inspected the remains.

“Ah yes. Another vertebrate. Another beautiful failure,” Hadrian carried on.

“How could you possibly know? It never made it out of the box,” Roman interjected.

“The ecology of Sinister failed the homeworld vertebrates for a host of complex, yet elusive reasons. They lasted for a time but didn’t thrive. At Planetfall, it was documented that Urbo’s first viceroy rode a ceremonial four legged mammal.” Hadrian paused. “Can you imagine?”

Dru tried to visualize what type of animal, but couldn’t. Giant flightless birds were two-legged. Maybe a colossus bat, wings evolved into weird forelegs? Doubtful. She remembered books of homeworld bestiaries, a spectrum of megafauna with horns, tusks, antlers, and other oddities. To think those long extinct creatures walked the surface of Sinister evoked wonder.

The only creatures to gain a foothold were microscopic creatures, the exoskeletal, flightless birds, and in very rare exceptions, other species, Hadrian explained. Set loose on Sinister’s meager biomes, the transplants overwhelmed the cruder indigenous organism —a host of which still remained. The

persistent sunlight and lower gravity instigated a gigantism in the survivors. All the crustaceans, insects, and arachnids grew to mammoth proportions. To compensate, the walking birds grew more fierce and predatory as they re-normalized into the new food chain.

“What about pets?”

“Like the bats?”

Dru nodded.

“I don’t know,” Hadrian pondered. “A good question.”

“Maybe they used them for hunting,” Roman added. “It used to be a sport.”

“It still is in Tajigo,” Dru said.

Dru remembered her mother’s stories of the hunting lodges in Tajigo’s twilight provinces, and how her grandfather used to drag the family into the moss forest and its unsettling mist. For a young girl from sunlight, it felt haunted. The Tigan hunters pitched the bats’ hanging perches, waiting for their ribbed ears to twitch. Zeroing in on their prey, the mammals dropped, fluttered, and disappeared into the impenetrable fog, guided by sound. Her mother always wished the bats wouldn’t return, but they did. Swooping back to their perches, they carried the writhing horror of a centipede, clamped in razor-sharp teeth. But watching the bats gnaw at their catches, its

array of legs and mandibles twitching as they were consumed alive, put her mother off. What remained was hacked into sections, smoked for flavor, then served as a delicacy.

They searched more of the crates. One held a seed bank, but the seals had broken. Inside was nothing but moldered and caked dust. Besides the lichen, Hadrian doubted anything else had escaped and survived the Salis Majora. Deep down, Dru had hoped for an unintentional biome, hidden in the interior jumbles of speckled shade. But nothing else alive remained. For her unfounded optimism, she only felt shame. She knew nothing else would be found in the fragments of the ancient hulk, but she couldn’t help herself.

Further into the sprawling wreckage, they crawled through an intact bulkhead and discovered an open space. The snarls of junk gave way to an arena of miniature dunes —dust, sand, and salt— pristine and unblemished. Beyond, a large breach opened out into the desert. The wind —what there was of it— blew throughout, vented by gaps in the peppered hull above. A cluster of spheres sat suspended in the center like a sculpture. The abstract garden seemed perfect, curated, and intended.

“This is unexpected. How completely strange.”

“And beautiful,” Roman added.

Tired, they camped in the sand. The little dunes made for

comfortable beds. Dru curled up in the powdered salt and tried to rest for a few hours. Her psychedelic dreams persisted. But they'd merged with visions of a perceived homeworld. She dreamt of man-made landscapes in constant flux, a city of euclidean swirls and streamers of light. Fast asleep, someone shook her shoulder and woke her.

"Dru!" Roman whispered.

He crouched next to her, pointing. She slowly sat up and collected her wits. Hadrian was still asleep.

"Footprints. We're not alone here."

CHAPTER NINE: THE PISTOL

The footprints were a few meters away, having gone unnoticed before. Roman mentioned a noise, a clank, or a sharp thud. They crouched in silence and waited but only heard the whistle of wind. They crept out to inspect the tracks. Dru argued they themselves might've made the impressions, but Rowan was adamant they hadn't. An average boot size, the prints were nondescript and revealed little detail. Whomever made them walked deliberately, no stops, shuffling, or doubling back.

Dru pulled out her knife and gestured for Roman to stay put.

"I'm going with you."

"Stay with Hadrian," Dru replied.

"What if it's them?" he shouted with a raspy whisper. "They

could kill you.”

“They could. And if you come, they’ll kill you too.”

Roman relented and stayed back as Dru followed the trail. She saw only one set of prints, not three. A multitude of grim scenarios could have played out to leave a lone survivor. Ludoviko’s psychopathy was a leading culprit. A possibility remained however, that the footprints belonged to others unseen, maybe a lost colony of hulk survivors. Such notions were too far-fetched however, the answer was simpler.

The footprints skirted the spheres, ending on the far side of the dunes. Beyond, the trail led into a large conduit, an open duct system crowded with pipes, hoses, and tram rails. Dru entered and headed for sunlight at the far end. She stumbled. Her eyes struggled in the dark. Afraid of twisting an ankle or worse, she cursed her brashness and slowed down. Stubbornly, she fumbled on until the blurry brightness gave way to a peculiar vista.

She stood on a ledge, overlooking a silo open to the sky. In the center was a vessel, another spacecraft but miniature. Like the rest of the hulk, it had succumbed to centuries of decay. But despite its weathering, it appeared intact. Suspended by protruding stanchions, the thin lemon-shaped vehicle perched atop a stalk of rocket motors. Its windows had long fallen away

from their frames, leaving only rust-ringed voids. Carbon filament cables offered a gangway leading from the ledge to the ship’s open airlock. Dru timidly crept out hand-over-hand.

Close in, she leaned out from the cable then hopped through the open hatch, landing in a surprisingly orderly space. The compartment's features were familiar, except the suit lockers were open and mostly empty. Helmet shapes lay at the bottom, half-buried in heaps of matter. At the ship's center was a ladder tube leading up and down. Seeing only darkness below, Dru climbed towards a faint light. Poking her head above the upper deck, she looked around.

The cabin was circular like the ship itself, the floor covered in debris. Pilot chairs stood against the wall, outfitted with sophisticated straps and buckle systems, their steel frames littered with the dust of long-deteriorated upholstery. A ring of viewports let in sunlight, filling the space with a haze of motes. Something was different here, the sheen of decay had been disturbed: scuffs on the floor, a plastic container half-filled with opaque liquid, hand prints…

“It’s an escape pod, I think,” a voice said in High Esperanto. “Or an automated exploratory probe. Hard to say, really. Maybe both.”

Dru froze in place.

“I know it’s you, Dru. I know your sounds. And who else would it be? Come in.”

Dru climbed up, drew her knife, and stepped into the cabin. Peeking around a central hub, she saw him. Delfino lay reclined on the remnant of a chair. In his hand was Dru’s pistol lazily pointed in her direction. He was oddly contorted, his mouth frozen with pain, lips dripping saliva and quivering. She saw the wet glean on his clothes near his chest. The infection had spread. She stepped towards him. He lifted the gun, his wrist limp and shaking. Soon, his hand gave way and fell into his lap.

“Delfino, where are the others? Where are Ludoviko and Milius?”

“I sent them off to the Nexus.”

“Why?”

“The mission must continue… I suppose.”

“We’re worried about Milius. He’s older. The heat and the thin atmosphere… ”

Delfino shrugged. “Not speaking each other's language limited us to hand signs and a bit of pidgin. He’s in better shape than he lets on, better shape than me, that’s for sure,” he said, gesturing at his injury.

“How long?”

“Since they left? Two wakes maybe. Although it’s hard to tell.

With my delirium, it's…”

“—Give me my gun and let me take a look at your wound.”

Dru stepped towards him. And once again he made a weak attempt to ward her off with the pistol. Head bowed, he let the gun lazily spin about his forefinger. He gripped the barrel and offered it to her. She grabbed the weapon, safed it, and slung it into her vacant holster. Kneeling next to him, she unzipped his tattered jumpsuit and pulled it down over his shoulders. The wound was septic, the watery reds replaced by sticky black with blobs of yellow. The smell overpowered her. Nose pinched, she stepped back and apologized.

“The spider didn’t do this to you, Deflino. Who did?”

“Johano, our mapmaker.”

“You said <u>you</u> were the Tigan mapmaker?”

“Not so much. Our roles, unlike your expedition, weren’t as well defined. After the lake, with the lightning, we argued about whether we should continue and what would happen if we didn’t. Until at last, the mutiny.”

“Mutiny?”

Delfino shrugged.

“What was the mission?” Dru recognized the military usage of the word ‘mission’ in High Esperanto, a deviation from the word ‘expedition’.

“To intercept the Vespan team –your team– beyond the Tajigo Meridian and acquire your friend Milius. Bring back evidence of the Nexus.”

“Mission complete,” Dru equipped.

Delfino retold the origins of the Tajigo intrigue. Working out of the embassy in Novum Pax, agents had picked up the reports regarding Milius and his unique ‘gift’. While Novum Pax tried to downplay the civil engineer’s visions and its implications, rumors spread throughout Vespera. Tajigo spies were thick.

Dru remembered Urbo’s agents. Her mother was the daughter of a Tajigo diplomat in Novum Pax. The embassy always tried to recruit them. While pleasant enough, her mother often invited the clandestine operators over for tea and a water-pipe –as was custom– but dismissed their Tigan politics. Whatever adversarial game Tajigo sought with Vespera felt absurd to her mother, Dru and Ava as well. Sinister was hardscrabble enough without subterfuge. But Tajigo was persistent.

Using an intermediary, Delfino explained that Urbo’s spies in Novum Pax had managed to purchase Milius’s confidential dossier amongst other intelligence details. They no doubt knew about his past, his trauma, and his susceptibilities. Delfino explained that they tracked the expedition’s route using radio signals, but the technical details of which Delfino couldn’t elaborate;

their radioman had died at the lake with the rest.

“Urbo was worried Vespera would find the Nexus and what it would mean,” Delfino explained.

“What could it mean?”

“The official opinion of our handlers was that it could be a source of power. Something that might be used as a weapon—”

“—A weapon, really?” Dru scoffed. “That’s absurd.”

“It’s honest. I find it hard to believe Novum Pax still holds onto that ‘utopian renaissance’ ideal from the Schism. It’s naive. That’s not how civilization works.”

“‘As Above, So Below’”

Delfino shook his head.

“—What do you think drove our ancestors to Sinister, Delfino? It wasn’t the weather.”

“—Our ancestors?” Delfino mocked. “The high priests of Capricorn, Baphomet, all that?” Delfino pished. “Homeworld pogroms drove our ancestors here.”

“Maybe.” Dru leaned against the ladder tube and gazed absently out a viewport. “But they were the faithful, and you needed a lot of faith to get to Sinister.”

“How about you, Druscilla? What are your thoughts on The Rip?”

No one had asked her such a question. An army of experts were always willing to step in and fill the void, laymen’s opinions

be damned. Her thoughts as to The Rip, and where it came from, was more abstract.

“Judgment,” she replied.

“The divine?” Delfino asked. “You think The Rip was intended?”

Dru nodded.

“I suppose you wouldn’t be the first that entertained such a thought. I have a hard time thinking the cosmos –Yahweh, Baphomet, whomever– would care enough about a few million savages marooned on a half-burnt, half-frozen rock in this forgotten stellar corner. But comforting, if true, wouldn’t you say?”

Dru shook her head.

“But you, Dru, volunteered to be here. Why?”

“I don’t know.”

Delfino flashed her his old charming smile, and for a moment his matted hair, pallor, and filth dissolved.

“Deserts are for zealots, not the ambivalent. Something brought you here, Druscilla. What was it?”

“My sister, Ava.”

“You lost her, didn’t you?”

Dru nodded. “She volunteered for the expedition, so I had to go with her. I didn't give it a thought. My mother’s Tigan, very traditional, very austere. So we were competitive growing up. ”

“Raised Tigan,” Delfino smiled. “I know a thing or two about that.”

“—‘Why can’t you be more like your sister’? That kind of thing. Not a lot of hugs. She refused to speak to us in New Latin, so we didn’t talk much. My father was a paramilitary, probably would have been happier if we were boys. But alas…” Dru explained.

Delfino exploded in a painful cough. An awkward silence followed until he regained his composure.

“What about you Delfino? Why are you out here?”

“Amnesty.”

“I don’t understand.”

Delfino explained how the Tajigo mission was a semi-skilled press-gang made up of prisoners, a few even facing judgment by scimitar, a rogues gallery of criminals. Typical Urbo, Dru figured as much. The Tigan judicial system was a holdover from before The Schism, a Planetfall relic steeped in Capricorn quisi-religion. If their mission succeeded, the criminals would be free upon return, given the conditions they not disclose their crimes to one another, and that they bring back proof they reached the Nexus.

“Why couldn’t you know each other’s crimes?”

“An attempt at group cohesion. There’s a hierarchy when it

comes to felons.”

“This mission… you never knew who you were dealing with?”

“With most of us, it wasn’t hard to figure out our crimes,” Delfino said. “In prison, you know certain types.”

“And what was your crime, Delfino?”

He paused, lips pursed, then spoke. “It was an accident.”

“Did you kill someone?”

“I’m not a murderer, Druscilla, but the ministers didn’t see it that way.”

“What did you do?”

Delfino told his story, his voice getting raspier. Delfino was an agent of Urbo’s High Domos, the fiefdoms that controlled Tigan politics. Sanctioned feuds were allowed, as long as a certain decorum was followed. Delfino had infiltrated a Domo, masquerading as a party guest, and then hid away. After nearly a wake, he emerged and took the saray hostage. Such tactics had scripts, rarely deviating from feuding’s unsaid rules. Sullying a Domo’s women, or even the suggestion thereof, was dishonor; and the Domo risked a loss of prestige. As Delfino waited for the ransom to be paid, one of the women attacked him. Wrestling her away, a gun went off, killing another girl, young and beautiful. And Delfino was made the easy villain.

“I’d been in prison for two years of a twenty year sentence,

until I was recruited for the mission."

"And what about Ludoviko?" Dru asked. Ludoviko was pathological, the quiet type; she could only imagine.

"A terminal sanction. For him, any wake could be the headsmen," Delfino said, making a slicing motion across his neck.

"His crime… was it children? women?"

"No," Delfino shook his head. "Not his style. He was a professional. Whatever you told him to do, he did. Ludoviko was a throwback with pre-Crossing mentality, an individual from the high steppes or the ice oceans of the ancient homeworld. Brutality commanded a premium in Urbo, and he was well paid."

"How were you going to get 'proof' of the Nexus?"

Delfino shrugged. "Not sure. We just wanted the chains off. I think we all thought we'd figure it out later."

"And why didn't you try to defect? Ask for asylum in Novum Pax?"

Delfino laughed, holding his chest tight trying not to cough. "You know the answer, Druscilla. You're a smart girl."

He was right; Dru did know the answer. They'd be marched back to the frontier at the end of a gun. And if by some miracle they were granted asylum, Tajigo's networks of Novum Pax spies and assassins would make quick work of them.

“The Nexus… You mentioned the ‘official opinion’. What’s your ‘unofficial opinion’?” Dru asked.

“About this thing in your boy Milius’s head?

Dru nodded.

“I’m a contrarian and a skeptic.”

Dru’s eyebrows perked. “Continue.”

“I found The Rip, and this Nexus ‘thing’, exceedingly dull, to be honest. I think it's an eclipse, or some natural cycle our primitive minds fail to grasp. My personal mission —beyond the official one— was to prove the narrative wrong—”

“—Wouldn’t that have put your freedom in jeopardy?”

“I think the chances of any of us being free men, wandering the streets of Urbo, was very slim.”

“But it didn’t stop you from carrying on.”

“I suppose not,” Delfino replied, head slung. “But somehow I always knew this is how it would be, my ignominious end.”

The escape pod grew quiet. Dru watched the motes linger around their heads, the soft woosh of their breathing pushing the specs into swirls and patterns.

“I’m sorry, Delfino.”

“Don’t be. I’m the villain, remember?”

Dru didn’t know how to reply, so she changed the subject. “I’ve been wondering about something.”

“Pray tell, Druscilla,” Delfino slurred with a forced smile, his lower lip drooping.

“The spider attack story… It was made up, wasn’t it?”

“—It was.”

“But you did come across one of them, didn’t you?”

Delfino nodded.

“We came across a ‘spider-thing’ as well. It was… not functional. The one you and Ludoviko encountered, what about it?”

Delfino winced as he repositioned himself. His pain was excruciating, but Dru could offer him little comfort. He stared at the floor then spoke. Every word exhausted him.

“We thought for a moment the creature was the rumored arachnid, but it didn’t act like an animal. It followed us — stalked us— from a distance. We only had a salt-shot pistol, just a flare gun really, worthless. We’d no way to scare it off. We expected it to come close, but it never did. Maddening. And the sounds it made… a clacking of its legs, this high-pitched drone, almost like a squeal. Finally, Ludoviko had had enough and charged it, giving it a swift kick. Inside its biomechanical carapace hid a proboscis, an articulated tentacle. It tried to grab hold of him, but we fought it off. In its thrashing, it managed to get me good,” Delfino said, gesturing to his side.

“Eventually it gave up and wandered off.”

“Where do you think it came from?”

Delfino shrugged. ”I don’t know, and I would be a fool to speculate. But I’m guessing you’re going to tell me.”

“The Rip. It has to be. We inspected its carcass. It was a robot. Not from Sinister.”

“You’re no skeptic, are you Dru?”

“What other explanation is there?”

“Coincidences exist, but I guess it’s hard to say in the end,” Delfno said, his words slurring. “Can I ask you an important question?”

“Have you been asking me unimportant questions?” Dru teased.

“Has the thought that Milius is nothing more than a charlatan crossed your mind, or anyone else's?”

“Are you suggesting he knowingly made up The Nexus?”

“He seems like a nice enough fellow, but you never know.”

“Scientific tests were conducted. Empirical proof, at least. I believe Milius. I truly believe he sees it. If I didn’t, I wouldn’t be here.”

“Perhaps.”

“He’s not making it up.”

Delfino shrugged, as much as the pain would allow. “It’s just that the thought dawned on us when we were with him. But Tigans

are cynical.”

“Amongst other things. Is sowing doubt a Tigan trait as well?”

Delfino shook his head. “No.”

“I liked you, Delfino,” Dru admitted.

“And I liked you, Druscilla of Novum Pax,” Deflino added.

“A part of me would like to think a fraction of your charm was authentic.”

Delfino gave a quiet laugh that segued into a wet cough. Once calm, he looked into her eyes in a manner that made her uncomfortable. She turned away.

“I need to ask you a favor.”

Desperate to change the subject and delay the grim chore she knew he was going to ask, she picked up the plastic container from one of the chairs.

“What’s this?” she asked. “It looks like a paste or something.”

“We found a few hermetic packs in the pod’s lower hold,” he replied, obliging her stalling tactics. “A little water mixed with the powder inside created that goo. Surprisingly, it was actually edible.”

Dru dipped two fingers in and scooped up a bite. The taste was starchy with a hint of protein, that while familiar, had hints of entirely foreign flavors. Emergency reserves for an

interstellar lifeboat had to last centuries —or even millennia— and the homeworld's engineers had discovered a means of preserving long-chain organic molecules.

"Is there anymore?"

"We went through most of it. There may be an odd bag or two left below. But the rest, Ludoviko took."

"Haute cuisine compared to isopod jerky and moldy lentils," she said, eating a few more scoops.

"Dru, I need you to do something for me."

Again, she tried to ignore him. But her attempts were pathetic and the silence grew uncomfortable, until at last she looked him in the eyes.

"I've been trying to get up the courage. But I can't, and I need you to help me," Delfino begged, his voice wavering.

"I've never killed anyone. I'm not a killer."

"I know. Unfortunately those that would've gladly obliged are no longer with me."

Dru sighed, closed her eyes, and remembered a hunting trip with her father as a girl, deep into the glowing forests of the Rutilans. Trained to use the gastraphetes with silkworm venom, she thought she was ready. The huntsman had just opened the firefly cages. She remembered squinting, waiting for the target of splattered purple light, the moment the Talus raptor had

popped an insect in its rostrum. She pulled the trigger and sent the bolt into the dark. The shriek was hideous, like a person peeled apart. When they finally found the creature, it was in the thrall of an excruciating death. Its chest throbbed. The bolt had weirdly skewered its throat, its tip popping the avian eye out from within. Her father admitted later he'd forgotten the venom. Dru refused to hunt after that.

Why couldn't he do it himself? He may not have been a murderer, but he was a killer. Her anger quickly turned to pity. She couldn't leave him; that would be worse. Reluctant, she pulled the pistol from its holster and chambered a round. Delfino ran his hand through his hair in an attempt to compose himself, eyes welling.

She pointed the gun into his face, cocking the hammer as he sobbed. Hesitating, she pulled the weapon back, then kneeled down next to him. She tried to catch his gaze, but his chin was sunk into his chest. Caressing his cheek, she stroked his stubble with her thumb. And without thinking, she leaned in and kissed him. Lingering, but not too long, she broke away and stood back. Delfino nodded and attempted a smile.

"Now," he whispered.

Dru again raised the pistol and shielded herself with an open palm. She pinched her eyes and pulled the trigger. The loud

report masked the wet sounds. Acrid smoke filled the cabin. A wail escaped her. She turned away, wiped the blood speckles from her hand, and pulled the clip out of the pistol. Half the rounds remained. She remembered more.

Roman was standing on the silo's ledge when she emerged from the airlock, his mouth open.

"I heard a gunshot."

"It's okay," she said as she made her way across the cable bridge. "I found Delfino, but Milius and Ludoviko aren't here."

"Delfino? What happened?"

"His wound…" she paused. "He was dying. Wanted to end it. So, I obliged him," Dru explained, avoiding the specifics.

"By the priests of Capricorn… are you alright?"

She nodded. "Where's Hadrian?"

"He's coming," Roman said, looking into the darkness of the conduit.

"I found breakfast," Dru said, reaching into her jumpsuit, pulling out a few hermetic packs of the protein powder, and dropping them to the ground. Roman picked up one of the yellowed bags and squeezed the contents.

"What do we do with it?"

"Just add water."

CHAPTER TEN: THE PIONEERS

They marched across the salt flats. Gone was the cumbersome sled, scrapped in favor of their rucksacks. They'd indulged in the ancient powdered provisions before setting off –a much needed boost– and Dru found herself with renewed energy. Retaining calories over the centuries –like fossilized oil buried deep in strata– was a homeworld engineering feat, a feat Sinister's geneticists were unlikely to rediscover. Fearful they'd be without food again, Roman kept the pemmican Dru was happy to discard. The isopod smelled fetid and she couldn't stomach it any longer. But Roman couldn't be swayed. Young and stubborn, he also persisted in lugging his radio and battery recharging unit. The ionosphere was poor this far sunward and

reception was terrible, but Dru said nothing.

Hadrian kept pace and was in better spirits. The hulk had given him plenty to ponder, and as a result he was mostly silent. Dru continued to make sure he sipped from his canteen as she tried not to worry about him. His heat exhaustion made her more cautious, and as such, she slowed their pace.

In spite of the mirage-blurred horizon, The Rip's ebon froth sharply cleaved the desert from the sky. Closer in, the tips of the starship section's steep triangles rose above the wavering mirage. The two landing craft —much smaller than the titanic wrecks of the hulk— appeared intact. They were custodial craft, manned by awake crews, and sent as pioneering stations at Planetfall. Their mission was to establish a seed colony, such that when the thousands of sleepers awoke, no one would starve or succumb. They were the dim embers intended to light civilization's fire anew.

Being a pioneer was the 'luck of the draw', a 'roulette', randomized chance tuned by algorithms. Custodial tours aboard L'Estelo Magnus lasted eleven years, and just a handful of people were kept awake to ensure the starship's automated systems remained automated. So, when L'Estelo Magnus finally arrived in orbit, it was the duty of whomever happened to be conscious to pilot the hulks down to the surface.

“I would speculate those pioneers were a competent lot,” Hadrian explained. “But after stumbling across this tragedy,” he gestured at the distant hulk wreckage, ”I’m not too sure. But accidents happen.”

They took shade near a starburst of spheres, the formation consisting of smaller orbs on the perimeter with successively larger ones clustered in the center. Even though The Rip appeared random in nature, its organization abided by what Hadrian described as ‘fractal algorithms’, mathematical chaos primed by a very specific set of initial conditions.

A hundred meters away sat the remains of another spider-robot, this one in much worse shape. Dru tapped it with her knife until parts of its biomechanical carapace sloughed off. Inside, circuitry, hydraulics, sensors, and parts of its chassis were fused in a jumble of scorched amalgam. Even the faint pulse of its anomalous reactor was cold, emitting no light.

“Dead, if there ever was a word,” Hadrian remarked.

Where the spiders originated was a mystery. Finding one so close to another was no coincidence. Dru could only think their proximity to the Nexus was intended, assuming of course the Nexus was real. The starburst, and the multitudes like it, might have been skeins, hatchling spider-robots from The Rip’s black spherical eggs. After tearing free more souvenirs from the

spider’s husk, they heaved their rucksacks on and made for the pioneer spacecraft.

“You said Delfino told you Ludoviko and Milius were headed to the Nexus and were maybe two or three wakes ahead, true?” Roman asked, catching up to walk beside Druscilla.

“Yes.”

“I took bearings back at the airlock. We’re moving laterally to it,” Roman said.

“Those hulks weren’t in the direction of the Nexus either, nonetheless the Tigans and their hostage ended up here.”

“True. Did you ask Delfino why? It seems rather important, all things considered.”

“He was dying, Roman. I didn’t trouble him.”

“Yet you went to the trouble of euthanizing him. You’d think that’d garner some currency with respect to the specifics of our plight. He didn’t say anything?”

Dru didn’t like Roman’s tone. She’d always regarded him as a naive boy despite his hardscrabble upbringing, but the radioman sensed something about her and Delfino’s encounter; Dru could tell. After she’d killed Delfino and emerged from the escape pod, she’d worked to conceal her distress. But her facade hadn’t been fully believable.

“I think Milius may be… confused,” she admitted.

“Confused?” Roman said, his face pinched. “Confused, how?”

“Remember what Hadrian said? That Milius could be misreading The Nexus, misreading his own symptoms because he might be susceptible –you know– because of his past?”

Roman nodded.

“Do you believe it?” Dru asked.

“Everyone had a little doubt. I suppose you have to –that’s why we’re here– but…” Roman replied

“–What if he’s not just misreading The Nexus, hallucinating – some byproduct of an oxygen-starved retina– but actually making it up, fabricating this white-light out of blackness –I thought you read his dossier?”

Roman nodded. “What about it?”

“Weren’t you listening to Hadrian? His mother was pathological, attention–seeking, infanticidally so. She was slowly killing her children.”

“Okay, and…?”

“Maybe it’s genetic. Maybe Milius has the same psychosis, a need for attention, contrived symptoms, all that. To have murdered her only daughter… somebody like that would think nothing of convincing ten strangers to march off to their deaths. The Nexus could be a conscious fabrication.”

“You’re calling Milius a charlatan?” Roman scoffed, head

shaking with incredulity. “That stuff Hadrian was carrying on about wasn’t in the dossier. He could be the one lying for all we know.”

“Why would Hadrian make it up?” Dru said, looking over her shoulder at the withered scientist.

“You read it, didn’t you?”

“Some. I can’t remember the specifics,” Dru quietly admitted.

“The contaminated water, the rich family, his sister dying… I’d never heard any of that; None of those details were in the stuff I saw. Maybe he stole the information. Maybe Hadrian was colluding with the Tigan spy network in Novum Pax —your people,” Roman mocked. “Maybe that’s how Delfino and his handlers caught wind. Hadrian could be a paid agent, a secret super-spy working for Urbo, or—”

“—Stop joking,” Dru admonished. “I’m being serious.”

“I’m also being serious.”

They walked together. Foot scuffs keeping rhythm to the tension between them until Dru spoke again.

“Delfino didn’t know a thing about Milius —couldn’t even speak to him— but he did mention that during their time with him, they suspected—”

“—Delfino? Those two Tigan psychopaths?” Roman interrupted. “This whole ‘charlatan’ business was his theory?”

Dru said nothing.

“You were still smitten with him, even after he and that sadist Ludoviko kidnapped Milius and left us for dead. Your judgment’s off. Your infatuation left you susceptible. That Tigan was an outrageous liar, you even said it yourself.”

“My judgment isn’t off.”

Roman was right about her and Delfino. However, she’d choose grim death before she’d admit it. The radioman was filled with contempt, a pouty jealousy. It wasn’t Roman’s business, but he’d twisted it into an offense. He wanted to shame her. And nothing she could say would convince him otherwise. It was a vindictive side she hadn’t seen in him before.

“I know how you are when you’re taken with someone. I remember you and that medic Cato, poor bastard,” Roman spat. “You were in your own world, desperate for attention, no longer a serious person —talk about attention-seeking, Druscilla, by the high priests of Capricorn, you’re the queen of it.”

“Stop it, Roman, before you say something you regret,” Dru said. “You don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“Then convince me otherwise.”

“No.”

“And why not?”

“Because I don’t have to justify myself to you. Because none

of this changes anything," Dru said, growing wary of Roman's antagonism.

"I'd say it does—"

"—Look," Dru said, halting to stare the radiomen in the eyes. "I'm leading this expedition now —what's left of it— by rank. Our current objective is to rescue Milius —regardless of any doubts I or anyone else may have about him— and I'm almost certain they came this way. It's forty two celsius and we're a good hour from shade. So, if you want to stand here and argue, acting like a rejected inamorato, and question my leadership…"

"—It's just that…"

Dru turned and walked away. From the expedition's original ten, only three remained, but the last thing she needed was to quell a mutiny, however small.

No one spoke. Lagging behind, Dru kept a cautious eye on Hadrian. He was limping. As they approached the pioneer spacecraft, the mirage dissipated to reveal more detail. Each ship was a towering tetrahedron held upright by a tripod of gigantic landing struts. The far ship sat tilted, one of its three legs having sunk into the salt crust. Their hulls were patterned with a rusty checkerboard of siena and pale orange, remnants of the exotic alloys and composites that'd help shield it during reentry.

The ships' geometry was juxtaposed with a few spartan spheres skirting its substructure. The ships stood nearly two hundred meters crowned by a mast of antennas and microwave dishes. As they approached, the nearest ship had sprouted a trunk-like appendage connecting its lower hull to the surface below. Dru noticed a shimmer underneath, hiding in its vast shadow. Glints of reflected light dazzled the ship's dim underside like an undulating net.

"It's water, a lake or something. I see the reflections," Dru pointed.

"A what?" Hadrian stopped to squint.

Dru pulled out her binoculars and adjusted the dials. Stinging sweat clung to her eyes, but she could see well enough. Much larger than the oasis, the lake was circular and nearly enveloped by shadow. Unlike the hulks, the pioneer ships were pocked with access ports and windows. But like the escape pod, the windows themselves had given way to black voids. Halfway up, a ring of viewports divided the hull's lower half from its top. An observatory or a command center, the deck had vantage over the surroundings. Dru was eager to explore it, if for nothing else but the view.

"What if Ludoviko has a bead on us from up there?" Roman wondered.

“I doubt it.” Dru dismissed the notion. “But if he does, we’ll see what kind of weapons officer he is then, won’t we? We’re moving targets, barely moving, but moving none-the-less. At little over a kilometer, it’s not an easy shot, especially since his rifle —my rifle— arc’s slightly to the left. It also has a right-handed stock.”

“You’re unnerving the boy, Druscilla,” Hadrian said. “Enough.”

“Fine.”

To ease Roman’s concerns, they walked in zig-zags on approach. The near-zenith sun sapped their strength. The solar flux was more intense. Reflections from the ground burned Dru’s brow, cheeks, and neck under her hat brim. Having gone lightly on the zinc oxide, they found themselves consuming more of their rapidly dwindling supply. After endless minutes, they reached the lakeshore.

“It’s almost perfect, isn’t it?” Hadrian said. “If this ship wasn’t here, you’d be hard pressed to make a convincing argument that this lake was naturally formed.”

“I don’t think it was naturally formed.”

They skirted the shoreline until they reached the shadow’s edge. The shade brought instant relief as they stopped near one of the massive tripod footings. Exhausted, they collapsed onto their rucksacks and gazed absently at the water, watching weak

ripples spread out over its surface like strokes of a paintbrush. Dru emptied her rucksack and searched an inner pocket. She pulled out a crumpled cigarette and stretched it out so as not to rip the paper. Using a stove igniter, she lit it and inhaled. The smell of smoke filled her with a soothing familiarity that masked a strong iron aroma wafting off the towering relic.

"Nasty habit. Likely to kill you," Hadrian smirked. "I thought you'd quit?"

"I thought I quit too," Dru replied.

Hadrian got up with a groan and walked to the shore. He kneeled down, touched the water, and brought a few drops to his lips.

"Fresh."

They all quickly emptied the brackish water from their canteens, waded out, and refilled them. Dru took a sip. Cold —or what passed for cold— and slightly sweet. She started to guzzle it but remembered Hadrian's warning. Like anything, too much water could poison. As dehydrated as they were, their brain chemistry was tenuous.

Dru waded back ashore, dropped her canteen, stripped to her underclothes, then dove into the lake's clear waters. The bottom was perfectly smooth, gradually falling away into the abyss. The

aquamarine had hints of emerald contrasting with the rainbow contours of mineral deposits at the lake's bottom. Dru swam out to the looming column of pipes and scaffold that dangled from the ship's center. Halfway, she turned to face the shore. Roman and Hadrian had followed her lead, gently wading in with their undergarments.

"What is that?" Rowan shouted, pointing at the column. "In the middle."

"Don't know," Dru shouted back.

"It might be a wellhead. A deep spring. The drilling could've caused the surrounding crust to collapse," Hadrian speculated.

Dru again started towards the column. Roman and Hadrian faded to a muffle. She closed her eyes and let the bracing water flow around her, toes swishing deeper to feel cool upwellings. The vast shadow and the echoes of splashing made the ship's underside feel cavernous. Near the middle, the bottom's colorful contours had disappeared, replaced by a deep cobalt blue.

Dru thought about the heavy metals and isotopes. The lake was no doubt a catch basin for the spacecraft's leaky fuels, coolants, and hydraulics. But cancer and neurological disease was the least of her worries. The immediacy of survival made such concerns a luxury. More menacing was the potential for rash or skin infections. A future diagnosis of multiple myeloma or

leukemia seemed abstract. Once closer, Dru investigated the central column. Most of it was a support structure surrounded by composite piping that had resisted centuries of decay. She grabbed hold of a ladder —or what she thought was a ladder— and stayed herself to peer down into the deep. White veins of silicates coiled around the submerged pipes like ghostly tentacles, originating from depths unseen. Ready to swim back, she heard someone shout her name.

She looked ashore. Roman and Hadrian paid her no mind, gesticulating and caught up in their own conversation. Another shout. She looked up. At the top of the column, in between clusters of blackened exhaust ports, she saw someone looking down at her from a catwalk.

“Milius?”

CHAPTER ELEVEN: THE TELESCOPE

Milius led them up dark stairwells and down corridors until Dru was utterly lost. After assurances he knew where he was going, they arrived at the observation deck, a large space filled with instruments and control panels he called ‘central operations’. Away from the open-air windows, he’d kitted out an apartment in one of the inner cabins, complete with a makeshift bed. Sequestered away and mostly sealed from the caustic atmosphere, the room remained well preserved and remarkably comfortable.

Dru asked what had become of Ludoviko. Milius deferred explanation, only saying it was a ‘bizarre set of circumstances’ and promising more details once they’d gotten settled. He was in good spirits despite a noticeable wound. The skin around his

left eye suffered burns where the sphere intersected his cheek and forehead. Dru inspected closer. Swollen blisters clustered on pale pinkish flesh. A steady weep of fluid pooled where raw skin lay exposed. She found it hard to believe he wasn't in worse pain.

"By the high priests of Capricorn, Milius. Your eye," Dru blurted.

"It looks worse than it feels. I think I might have some internal damage. I get nose bleeds. But I'm healing…" He paused. "Slowly."

"What happened?"

Milius went on to describe the incident.

Delfino had gone looking for another redd, leaving Milius alone with Ludoviko. As they couldn't understand each other, Milius had no way to interpret the Tigan's intent. He made Milius stand still and fired several pistol rounds at his head. Most had mercifully missed, however one grazed his neck leaving a welt.

"Why did he do that?" Dru asked, knowing Ludoviko was a convicted murderer of an unsaid barbarity. The rationale and reason for him doing anything lay in the theories of criminologists and psychologists, she supposed.

"An experiment, most likely."

Maybe Ludoviko had stumbled across the same phenomena Dru had noticed with the bullet, his curiosity and cruelty converging.

“The other bullet entered my left eye, but wasn’t ejected,” Roman continued.

Instead, its velocity had converted into a searing heat, its mass completely absorbed. After Delfino returned with eggs, the Tigans got into an argument. Through their gesticulations, Milius inferred Ludoviko had concocted a story about how the Vespan had tried to attack him, and that the spent rounds were in self-defense. A ludicrous notion. Delfino scoffed at the excuse and examined Milius. Since Milius hadn’t been seriously injured, Delfino acquiesced.

“What about the Nexus?” Hadrian asked. “Can you still see it?”

Milius shrugged. “I think so. Everything was blurry right after, but now…,” he said, pointing out the window in the Nexus’s direction.

“Ludoviko is a psychopath, most likely a criminal, but why would he risk the mission?” Hadrian wondered.

Dru said nothing.

“Like I mentioned, I think he was trying out a theory,” Milius reasoned. “However poorly constructed.”

“Savagery,” Roman offered.

“—Maybe he didn’t believe in the mission,” Dru said. “Maybe he

wanted an excuse to abort it.”

Roman flashed her a knowing look, attempting to shame her for excusing Ludoviko's sadistic behavior. But Dru beamed back; she wasn’t having it.

“I see you’ve recovered your pistol,” Milius said, looking at her holster. “You must’ve encountered Delfino. Ludoviko left it with him when we parted.”

“—Dru killed him,” Roman interjected.

“He asked me to,” Dru said, glaring at Roman. “He didn’t have the strength.”

“He was delirious when we left him. That wound and the fever… He couldn’t walk anymore, and Ludoviko was growing impatient.”

Milius gave them a tour of the observation deck. Unlike the hulks, the pioneer craft was intact, having managed to land as intended. Corrosion had taken its toll on the sun-filled operations deck —as one would expect— but other rooms and compartments were untouched. Milius had even found a cache of the protein powder embedded in a commissary dispensing machine.

“Have you found the remains of the pioneer crew?” Hadrian asked Milius.

“I’ve been hesitant to explore the darker decks. But no, not a trace. Not even an odd teacup,” he said, looking at the empty chairs facing dashboards of dead display panels and gauges.

“Where’d they go?” Roman wondered.

“If they left food behind, they most certainly weren’t starving. And with the lake underneath us…” Hadrian speculated. “Something tells me their protocols changed after they’d lost the hibernation pods.”

“They didn’t stay put; that much is obvious,” Dru said, wondering exactly what did happen to them. The Salis Majora was empty and near sterile for over a thousand kilometers; they must’ve known it. “Roman, does that light you rigged still work?”

“I think so,” he said, pulling his rucksack off his shoulders to retrieve it. A quick toggle of the switch and it started to glow.

“We’ll check out a few of the lower compartments after Milius tells us what he knows about Ludoviko. Is he still lurking about? Setting traps?”

“No,” Milius said, shaking his head. “We’re safe. I’m certain. To properly explain the situation, I’ll need to show you something. Why don’t you rest, and I should have it ready in a bit.”

“Why the wait?”

“I need to set something up. It’ll be easier than trying to explain it.”

Dru found a spacious cabin on the opposite side of the observation deck. After thoroughly dusting the cushion remnants, she tried to sleep. While not as hot as the desert floor, the stagnant air and musty odors made her uncomfortable. She cracked the door, releasing a chorus of screeches from its oxidized hinges. With better light, she laid down and looked around the cabin. An officer’s quarters, a desk held a command console with several displays, their delaminated screens amber in color. An adjacent closet contained empty racks for clothing or environmental suits. A simple chair sat in the corner, no doubt unmoved in the intervening centuries. She rolled onto her back and gazed at a ceiling, hypnotized by a grid of grimy diodes next to an air vent.

A month ago, fresh to the Salis Majora, she never would have imagined this refuge in such a wasteland. For a moment, it felt normal, conceivably a room in an abandoned building back in Novum Pax. But it was anything but. The room had been manufactured light years away with metals and minerals mined from the homeworld or its nearby moon. A part of her wanted to commune with the spirit of the pilots, and channel the message that Sinister —a human world now— had succeeded.

With heavy eyes, Dru faded into sleep. The psychedelic dreams were different, more vivid and realistic. She stood lost in The

Rip, but the sphere's were like soap bubbles and no longer opaque. She saw amorphous things moving inside like an amniotic sac. Anxiety spiraled into a sharp panic, then a doom-ridden claustrophobia. Sweat drenched, she awoke to someone whispering her name in the shadows. She shot upright and pulled her knees to her chest.

"Who goes there?"

"Dru. It's Milius. I didn't mean to startle you."

"How long was I asleep?"

"A few hours, not sure."

She hadn't slept for so long in weeks. Milius took a seat in the chair. Much to her surprise, the ancient furniture held with barely a creak. Milius was as before, well shaved with hair trimmed, unlike Roman and Hadrian who'd resorted to ponytails and beards. How he pulled off such provisional grooming, Dru hadn't a clue.

"Are the others awake?"

He nodded.

"Are you ready to explain the Ludoviko situation?"

"More or less. I've got things setup."

Dru couldn't imagine what Milius had rigged.

"Milius, I want to apologize. I should've never let that happen back at the oasis. I'm the weapons officer. I'm

responsible, and I was careless."

He shook his head. "No apology needed. We've all been through a lot. I survived. They didn't kill me, despite their frustrations."

"That damned Ludoviko."

"—It wasn't just Ludoviko, Delfino was frustrated as well."

"How so?"

"The Nexus. As you're aware, my inner vision is ambiguous," he said, tapping the sphere lodged in his head, "and they caught on to it. Delfino would shout at me if I took too long. And it takes a while, as you're aware."

Dru nodded.

"Both of them would argue, and then they'd perform experiments. They'd blindfold my good eye and spin me about, over and over. If I wasn't consistent, they'd yell at me, threaten to slap me. I think they thought I was playing a game, purposefully leading them astray."

Dru recalled what Hadrian had said about Milius's childhood. Curious, as well as anxious, she decided to question him. Milius was always polite, never hostile, never brooding. She didn't expect a confrontation.

"Were you leading them astray?"

"No." Milius shook his head. "Aimlessly wandering this desert

would've only hastened our demise. And what would I be protecting? I don't even know what the Nexus is, or what it means," he paused. "They were angry, but not with me necessarily. The language barrier… It was hard to sort it out. When we spotted the hulk, the antagonism stopped."

"They didn't think you were steering them away; they thought you were lying to them. Delfino confessed as much before I…" Dru said, making a subtle gun gesture with her forefinger and thumb.

"I see," Milius said.

"They were angry because they might die out here, in this wasteland, over a ruse, a hoax, a fraud perpetrated by some 'Vespan charlatan'. His words."

Milius shook his head, eyes on the floor.

"Milius, I know about your mother. I know she was sick, and I know she purposefully made you and your sister ill to get attention. Why?"

Taken aback, Milius paused for the better part of a minute and gazed at a trace of light stenciled in the shadows, then spoke. "Veserpa's oligarchs are highly parochial, as you're aware, and as such, child rearing holds to those old pre-Schism institutions. My mother suffered from neglect. My grandparents ignored her."

Dru listened. Milius confirmed what she'd heard about Novum

Pax’s upper stratum. Children of inheritance were treated more like reserve banks than heirs, a human reservoir of value maintained for liquidity, a legal place holder in time. The situation was rife for abuse and neglect. Children were more a commodity than anything, raised by staff and machines to keep a legal bulwark in place.

While post-Planetfall hibernation was banned, wealthy families maintained the technology in secret. Rumors around Baphomet cults were common, tied to the oligarch’s predilection towards immortality, enabled by rogue hibernation pods. Clan heirs, supposedly deceased for hundreds of years, were often seen mingling at parties or wandering about incognito. But nothing could ever be confirmed as the poorly kept secrets were maintained by bribery and corruption. The reality existed only in conspiracies, all officially denied.

Milius’s mother, a victim of such a dynamic, was a forgotten child. Rarely seeing her parents, she raised her children on an isolated floor in one of Novum Pax’s sterile sky towers. Physician visits were the only time their mother saw Milius’s grandparents, almost as a legal witness to ensure ‘all was being done’ to maintain the health of the lineage, or more rightly, their legal claim. Milius’s family bribed the pathology and genetic auditors, as most wealthy families did. Chronic sickly

children were a liability, and if orphaned, lacked any claims to dynastic wealth. A small defect in the DNA, a congenital issue, or an inherited neurological disease could end a family line if discovered.

"Do you hate your mother?"

Milius shook his head. "I've forgiven her, even for my sister's death. I try not to speak ill of the dead."

"I've heard generational trauma repeats. Cycles. Do you know what I'm trying to say?" Dru attempted to find a tactful means to broach the subject. It was too much of a coincidence to ignore, Delfino's theory of charlatanism –making stuff up for attention– and Milius's mother's hoaxing.

"You're wondering if The Nexus is contrived. Did Delfino discuss this with you?"

Dru nodded. "Amongst other things."

Dru recounted her conversation with Delfino, including the revelation the Tigan mission was sent to intercept Milius, with Urbo being worried The Nexus could be used as a potential weapon. She explained Tijigo's spies had no doubt clandestinely purloined his dossier. And knowing its details, the Tigans speculated he might have fabricated The Nexus as a way to seek attention, a pathology inherited by his mother. And how it might have prompted Ludoviko's cruel experiment. Wary, she kept hidden

the fact the Tigans were press-ganged criminals. Having Roman carry on about her and Delfino was enough without the disclosure of her former paramour being a convicted killer.

"And do you believe what he told you about me?" Milius asked, leaning back in his chair.

"Maybe there's some genetic quality to the compulsion, some inherited need to seek attention, no matter how pathological. I was just speculating. It's just that…" Dru stammered.

"—I'm not offended, Druscilla. But tell me, specifically, other than the hypothetical, how do you think I'm fabricating The Nexus?"

A wave of heat pulsed through her body. She stammered at first, then closed her eyes before speaking clearly. Milius was asking her to lay out the evidence. "I'm suspicious, Milius. This 'divination' power you've acquired is subjective and known only to you. All the tests… —those could have been an illusion, a magic trick. And to be honest, you're not acting the part."

"The part?"

"The profile of a mystic, a holy man, a zealot consumed by prophetic doom, a true believer, the wild eyed, wild haired, robed shamans of cataclysm —all the stuff Sinister has had to contend with from time-to-time. Cults of Baphomet, and the like…"

“I’m well aware of Planetfall dogma and its occasional revivals. And because of it, I’ve been overly cautious, perhaps to a fault. Inviting doubt is the price I pay. The last thing I wanted was to encourage any pre-Schism hysteria.”

“You don’t have to be a messianic prophet of doom to be convincing. Maybe you just crave attention, as a compulsion, as a coping mechanism for trauma.”

Milius smirked. “I’m not my mother, Druscila. I like to think I’m the opposite. I loathe attention. I’ve been through too much psychoanalysis to not know better. However, I assure you, I’m earnest in my claim.”

“Again, apologies.”

“No need.”

“You should be angry. I don’t understand. You’ve suffered, and continue to suffer over this, and here I am, doubting you,” Dru said, genuinely confused.

“I suffer from my past —true— just not necessarily in the way you think. Maybe in the opposite way you think. I need doubters.”

“Why?”

Milius went on to describe his neurosis. Having endured mis-diagnosis as a child —intestinal parasites being a malady specific to avian species— and the madness of its mystery, he

was a chronic skeptic. Fearful of physicians in adulthood, he'd avoided medicine and occasionally suffered highly curable infections. While the external impact of The Rip on Milius was obvious, the internal effects were unknown; X-rays and scans of his head revealed nothing, blood work indicated only inflammation. But The Nexus was undeniable.

"I've pondered the 'what ifs' –anomalous brain chemistry, tumors, anoxia, etc… I'd give anything to prove this Nexus vision is a physiological glitch, a floater, a detached retina, whatever… The fact that everyone –all of Novum Pax– believes I have this 'astral vision' hasn't helped. I've worried it could whip up into a mass religious delusion. I'm worried it's just some neurological 'anomaly'. And I'm concerned I've condemned everyone –our enemies included– to an agonizing death out here in this wasteland, over nothing."

Dru ran her hand through her hair, then dropped her head into her knees. She felt embarrassed. She'd accused him of being a hoaxer, but he was really an agnostic. The Rip's arrival was supernatural; no scientific theory explained it. But yet it was everywhere, a prophecy, a harbinger. It tempted even the most logical with the superstitious. However the Nexus, with Milius its agent, delivered no message of cosmic doom. It was a white blotch in a nameless void. Milius was honest in this respect.

However, Milius needed answers science had failed to provide. He viewed Novum Pax's scientists like his childhood doctors, know-nothings and speculators. If the Nexus was tangible –a physical place beyond the sunward horizon– it was worth risking his life and the lives of others to reach it. And all of Vespera was complicit. In the end, nobody had been duped; Dru had to admit it. They could've dismissed Milius as a psychotic, but no one did; they couldn't afford to. In the vacuum of truth, the expedition was an impossible opportunity to pass up.

Dru wondered, if they managed to reach the Nexus, would they find anything at all? Or –if it was real– would it be masked by just more ubiquitous spheres. The Nexus existed within a hidden dimension –within The Rip itself– but the universe didn't guarantee answers. The worst outcome would be if the Nexus was indeterminate; Milius had to be aware of such an eventuality. Was he prepared? And if such an instance came to pass, would it change anyone's minds either way? More research could be conducted –brain tapping electrodes, magnetometers, low frequency sensors– but nothing would be definitive. And how long would Milius's sanity hold? Dru couldn't deny Milius was experiencing something; he'd convinced her. But it didn't change the fact that his left eye –the Nexus anomaly– was a bent compass needle.

“I think we’re close to it,” Milius said. “Less than a week.”

“And then we’ll know, one way or another. If the atmosphere’s right, we’ll try to send a transmission —a beacon— to Vespera and report back, and let them know what we found. Maybe we’ll have enough bandwidth to say goodbye.”

“Don’t be so hasty to eulogize, Druscilla. Look where we are,” he said, head swiveling about. “This place was on no maps, probably just a legend, a rumor. Yet here we sit. We may find more undiscovered opportunities.”

Roman and Hadrian appeared at the doorway.

“Is Dru awake?

“Yes.”

“Are you ready, Milius?”

“Let’s go.”

Milius led them up through a meandering series of hatches and gangways with only slivers of light to guide their way. Most of the ship’s portals were frozen shut, leaving only the ajar accessible. The result left the ship’s passages a maze. Through an interlocking utility bay, they stepped onto a platform just below the ship’s looming antenna masts. The view was impressive.

“I found this stowed in a hermetic closet on the utility deck. The optics needed dusting, but it’s in working order,” Milius said, patting the barrel of a refracting telescope mounted to a

rusty tripod. “It took some effort to haul it up here and recalibrate it.”

“What’s to see?” Roman asked.

Milius gestured for Roman to take a look. The radioman bent down and squinted into the eyepiece’s brass cylinder.

“Is that Ludoviko?” Roman blurted.

Milius shook his head. “No. That’s not Ludoviko. I don’t know who that is.”

CHAPTER TWELVE: THE BODY

Dru stepped up and peered into the telescope. The Rip formed a savannah a kilometer or two away. In an open space, she saw a person —or what she thought was a person— sprawled across the salt pan. Dressed in black, she noticed little detail. They were thin and wiry, however their head and upper back looked distended like a hunchback. Bulging forearms and splayed feet added to the caricature. She waited for it to move, but it remained still.

“Not a breath or a spasm.”

“It’s wearing a suit,” Milius explained. “When I started playing with the telescope, I noticed it stumbling and disoriented. Then it fell to its knees, crawled for a bit, and collapsed.”

“Is it dead?”

“Ludoviko finished it off. He pushed me aside to have a look, then grabbed Dru’s long rifle and went out to investigate.”

“And what about you?” Roman asked.

“He left me here. After we abandoned Delfino, he didn’t have the same… enthusiasm. As such, he mostly ignored me. For which I was grateful.

“After he clambered down through the ship, I saw him trek out into the savannah towards it. Ludoviko got within a hundred meters and stopped. It moved, but only barely. He loaded the rifle, kneeled down, and fired several rounds into it. It writhed, then stopped. He got close enough to give it a few wary kicks.

“But something caught his attention. He abandoned the body and headed into the savannah. The Rip was dense, and it was hard to follow him. He moved deliberately. He was stalking something. He crouched and aimed the rifle again. I couldn’t see what he was firing at. I heard the reports; I don’t remember how many shots. Then he stood up and moved further out. I lost track of him after that. He never returned, much to my relief. That was a few wakes ago. He took nothing with him, no canteen, no food, nothing.”

“Good riddance,” Roman spat.

“I watched for him –panning the edges of the savannah– but alas… Now it’s just that awful desert quiet.”

Dru looked through the telescope again, shifting focus out to the horizon. The Rip was mostly a single layer, but now the spheres had stratified, their diameters growing smaller as they rose into the sky. The phenomena was changing. It imitated a forest, with clusters of the black orbs binding to each other like clumps of trees, its morphology dictated by an alien DNA.

“Roman and I will take some gear and investigate,” Dru said.

“But I should go,” Hadrian protested. “I’m the scientist. You need me to properly assess what might be going on with all this.”

“Roman will take notes,” Dru said curtly. “He’s technical. And to be honest, I need you to preserve your strength. If you drop out there again, I’m stealing your canteen and leaving you to boil.”

“I’ve recovered. I’m perfectly capable,” Hadrian argued.

“We’ll do our best. Roman is technical; he can take notes. I trust his judgment,” Dru replied.

“I’ll be fine,” Hadrian said, straightening himself, ignoring her. “Let’s go.”

“–Do you think I'm joking?” Dru said, pivoting about to stand eye-to-eye with the scientist, her hand resting on her pistol.

“I’m not. You’re staying here.”

Hadrian took notice and ceased his protests. Dru and Roman filled their canteens from the lake and set out for the body. A few hundred meters out, Dru turned and waved to Milius. Barely visible in the shadows of the observation deck, he gave a half-hearted wave in return. Shade was more plentiful as The Rip thickened. Consequently, they were no longer forced to zigzag about from sphere to sphere to catch shade, making for a less arduous trek. Even as the heat was held at bay, Dru’s ears crackled and rang with the sunward pole’s thinning air.

“How can there be anyone else out here?” Roman pondered.

“We’re out here, aren’t we?”

“True. But who else would be out in this wasteland, and why?”

“The Tigans were out here. It’s downright busy in the Salis Majora,” Dru smirked.

She made light to avoid grappling with the possibility others roamed ‘terra incognita’. The thought unnerved her. Speculations seemed foolish, although she couldn’t help herself. The body could be a descendant of the pioneer crew, living in isolation, lost tribesmen; it was a feasible yet far-fetched explanation. Another explanation was that other explorers —other expeditions— were launched, private clandestine outfits unsanctioned by Tajigo or Vespera. Treasure seekers. But why? Were they also

stalking Milius? Then Roman brought up yet another possibility, a possibility Dru also entertained.

“Maybe it's a robot, a simulacrum, like the spiders.”

“But from where?”

“Another planet.”

A nervous laugh escaped Dru. Roman squinted, mouth pinched, as if insulted. She hadn’t meant to insult him. The absurdity of the notion paralleled the absurdity of The Rip’s existence, which was an undeniable fact. She apologized, even admitting to thinking along the same lines.

“But how did they arrive?”

“With The Rip, out of nowhere,” Dru speculated.

“You can’t just have something where there was nothing,” Roman argued.

“Do you need proof?” Dru laughed, gesturing to the hovering black bubbles around them. “Maybe The Rip’s an illusion, cosmic radiation from a distant nebula inducing a collective hallucination,” Dru half-joked.

“Aren’t mass hallucinations a psychological theory?”

“Sure, but we’d be fools to believe it in this instance. You knock into one of these hard enough,” she said, wrapping her knuckles on a larger sphere, ”it’ll bruise you. I don’t know of any psilocybin mushrooms that are that strong. Do you?”

Roman shook his head. “I’ve never tried mushrooms.”

“The Rip is physical –not a figment– just like the spiders-robots were physical. Remember the bullet? It was real. I still have a few fragments in my rucksack. If I went rummaging around, they’d still be there. The Rip isn’t in our minds.”

“They’re from The Rip then,” Roman deduced. “It’s as simple as that.”

“It’s the obvious explanation. But simple? Hardly.”

After an hour, they reached the body. It lay on its side with its back to them, a featureless silhouette in the blinding white. They kept their distance and circled around. Hidden from the telescope, but visible opposite, was a puddle of blue fluid pooled around its chest.

“Blood?”

“Don’t know.”

They crept closer. It was human-like but taller and thinner. Like the spider-robot, its exterior had similar textures and colors. A black faceted bubble hid its face like a space helmet. Its bulging forearms formed gauntlets that merged into three-fingered gloves. Embedded in it were an assortment of buttons, nozzles, and gauges, each labeled with symbols similar to those of the spiders. Its boots were oversized with wide articulated toes extending below and out from the soles.

“It looks diseased.”

“Can machines be diseased?”

Dru shrugged.

The suit’s composite plating was frayed and tinged with brown residue. The elastic fabric between its exoskeletal facets were cracked. Dru kicked the body onto its back. It flopped not like a machine, but a person. Two exit wounds formed craters in its chest. No blood, but the wounds were still wet with an electric blue ooze.

“I’m going to take it apart like I did the spider,” Dru said, straddling the torso and unsheathing her knife.

“What if it’s booby trapped?” Roman stepped back. “Maybe we should think this through. Maybe it actually <u>is</u> diseased, a virus or bacteria or something.”

“Then stand back.”

Dru squatted and cut through the soft parts of the suit, carving around the plated sections that conformed to its chest and abdomen. The material tore like an old cotton shirt. More fluid seeped out. A foul odor caused her to reel. She stood up and took a few steps back.

“What is that?” Roman exclaimed, shielding his nose with his forearm. “It smells like… death.”

“It’s flesh. Whatever was living in this suit’s been slow

cooking for wakes and wakes.”

Dru held her breath and went to work cutting the rest of the body out of the sophisticated suit’s various integrated apparatus. She recalled the spacesuit they’d used to cool Hadrian. Even though she wasn’t familiar, its workings were straightforward enough. But this suit was a puzzle. The helmet proved the most challenging to remove with its numerous interconnects and plugs. A last gush of blue fluid spilled out as Dru managed to finally wrench it free.

“It’s a man,” Roman exclaimed.

“Like no man I’ve seen,” Dru added.

She crouched down and tried not to breathe as she twisted and pulled the body’s gauntlets from its arms. They were heavy. In fact the entire suit’s weight betrayed the atrophied body within. With most of the suit cut away and the body denuded, Dru and Roman had a look at the human-like corpse. Despite it being taller than Vespans or Tigans by a half-meter, it possessed remarkably normal male genitalia. But the rest of him had experienced massive trauma. So much so, Ludoviko’s finishing shots were a merciful favor.

“What the hell happened to him?”

“Don’t know,” Dru admitted. “But it looks like <u>everything</u> happened to him.”

“I know about nuclear poisoning, but this…”

The man’s body was covered in a rash with distended pustules surrounded by subdermal lumps that resembled tumors or swollen lymph nodes. His joints were purple and bulged with fluid. Clouded eyes gazed into the zenith sun. Tufts of sticky black hair clung to seeping wounds on his scalp. His fingernails and toenails were falling off, and like his teeth, looked rotten. Beyond the decay and distended proportions, the man was unlike anything Dru or Roman knew. Like the photos of ancient homeworlders, the man looked alien, not Tigan nor Vespan.

“It’s not blood,” Roman said, dabbing the blue fluid and sniffing his fingers. “I think it’s coolant. His backpack –that hunchback thing– shrouds cooling fins inside the ducts.”

Roman released the backpack’s brittle clasps and pulled it free. So deteriorated, he easily took it apart to have a look inside. Within was the faint glow of a power plant, similar to the spider-robot’s they’d dissected. Beyond the networked cooling system, the backpack was equipped with a water filter and recirculator.

“It’s rigged to drink his own piss,” Roman said, making a disgusted face.

“Can’t be any worse than the brack we’ve been distilling,” Dru said, inspecting the stranger’s equipment. “What about the gear

on his forearm?”

Roman picked up a gauntlet and slid it over his right hand until it was snug. After complaining about the weight, they both arrived at the conclusion that the stranger’s suit was outfitted with a hidden biomechanical assist that provided mobility and strength. Roman fiddled with it, clenching and expanding his grip and feeling its ‘clicks’ and ‘incremental resistance’. He made a sudden fist, prompting it to hum.

“Something’s spinning up, it’s buzzing.” Roman tried to describe the sensation.

“Careful. It might malfunction, just like the rest of him,” Dru warned. But the warning came too late.

A burst of electricity sputtered from a recessed spigot. A plasma ball hovered for an instant then shot into the ground near Dru’s feet. An explosion of salt sprayed her legs with high speed fragments. Dru was startled but not hurt; the ejecta drew no blood. She lifted a pant leg and saw red marks on her shins. If the missile had hit her outright, she’d little doubt it would have maimed and hobbled her.

“Roman! What did I just tell you,” she yelled.

“How was I supposed to know it would do that?”

A fair question, but Dru had warned him. Unlike Hadrian, Roman wasn’t a scientist and lacked proper intuition. Why wouldn’t

this stranger be armed? Dru was armed, her pistol slung on her hip. Obviously Ludoviko had proved a deadly encounter. If the stranger hadn't been so diseased, would Ludoviko have stood a chance?

"I'm sorry, Dru," Roman apologized.

"Careful with that thing. It's short circuiting. It can bite."

"What got to him? An infection? A cancer?"

"It was fast. And we have no clue if it's contagious, yet here we are. Maybe it's a good thing we're stranded thousands of kilometers away from civilization. The Rip a plague? That might be enough to finish Sinister off for good."

Dru felt ignorant. This stranger, his purpose, his relationship to the spider-robots and possibly The Rip, was profound. And as Vespera's ambassador, she felt woefully inadequate.

"Maybe there's other strangers. Maybe they're all over Sinister, not just here. Maybe these things have started to hatch from The Rip."

"Or we're closer to the Nexus now," Dru speculated, staring at Roman knowingly.

"The Nexus? You mean <u>that</u> fiction Milius conjured for fame and fortune?" Roman mocked. "Where'd this change of heart come from, Druscilla? You were about to dismiss Milius as a fraud."

“Milius and I had a talk.”

“He must be more charismatic than I gave him credit for. How are you not convinced whatever he told you wasn't just another persuasive trick?”

“Because he’s not convinced the Nexus is real. And to be honest, what would be the point? To convince three survivors of an ill-fated expedition to believe nonsense? He knows that if he told us he saw paradise in that black ball lodged in his head – complete with waterfalls and guava trees– we’d believe him. We’re that desperate.”

Roman inspected the gauntlet’s controls. Something caught his attention as he squinted at its miniature analog displays. He waved it around, Dru dodging his aim, fearful he might find another trigger.

“Watch where you’re waving that thing.”

“There’s a compass built into it. Come look.”

Dru crowded next to Roman. Odd shaped buttons without markings encircled a round dial. The dial was black except for a blue wedge with aligned tick marks. As Roman rotated the gauntlet, the indicator held steady.

“Normal compasses this far poleward are more erratic,” Dru noted. “Sinister’s magnetic fields are too unstable. Maybe there’s a compensator built into it.”

“Maybe,” Roman said. “But the glove doesn’t have any power. The buttons don’t do anything. It must tap power from its internal ammunition reservoir like a battery. Something exotic.”

“We’ll take it back and show Hadrian.”

“What about him?” Roman looked at the dead man. “It seems undignified to just leave him out here. The sun’s going to make a mess of him.”

They both grabbed an arm and dragged him into shade. Dru closed his eyes, recoiling from the mushy sensation of his eyelids. She could only guess how deep the rot had permeated.

When they returned, they found Milius and Hadrian back at the antenna mast with the telescope. They’d swung it about and were gazing at something else.

“What do you see?” Roman asked.

Dru said nothing, wondering what could have been so important to divert their attention

“It runs in this direction as well,” Hadrian mumbled, squinting into the telescope.

“Almost in the opposite direction,” Milius said, shielding his eye as he gazed at the horizon.

“Roman. Dru. You’re back,” Hadrian said at last. “We followed you out until we noticed something peculiar. You can see faint tracks in the salt flats. They’re just below the surface, barely

visible. You have to be high up to see them. Milius, did you come across any ground vehicles in the holds below?”

“Too dark. I didn’t explore much, but I did scout around the sister ship and noticed a collapsed ramp. It might have been used for ground operations.”

“Where was this group headed?” Hadrian muttered. “The liminal colonies? They might’ve established radio contact. Hard to say, in the end.”

Incredulous, Dru interrupted. “Do you care what we found out there?”

“Yes! Yes! The body. Tell us,” Hadrian said, his spell broken.

They relayed their discovery. Hadrian asked demanding technical questions that neither Dru nor Roman could answer, a conspicuous attempt to shame her for not taking him along. Milius was the opposite, instead quietly listening. They indulged in endless speculation. Dru grew exhausted listening to the self-indulgent chatter; she’d had enough. She pulled out her second to last cigarette, sat down on the grate, and smoked it. She let the dizzying patterns of The Rip hypnotize her.

“What do you think, Dru?” Milius asked as the conversation grew quiet.

“At some point our endless talk will veer into the absurd,” she answered, “or worse, the religious.”

CHAPTER THIRTEEN: THE GAUNTLET

They ran the experiment several times. Most of the variations involved isolating Milius in dark compartments and spinning him around. After which Roman would enter with his lamp and check tha man’s position in relation to the gauntlet’s indicator. Each time both would align within a few degrees. After more stumbles and bumps down dark corridors –attempts to further electromagnetically shield the experiment– the tedious routine ended with Milius’s protests.

“It always points to the Nexus,” Hadrian said, tugging on his scraggly beard.

“Looks like I’ve been replaced. Maybe I’ll just head home,” Milius quipped.

The stranger knew of the Nexus, to the extent his device had been engineered to point to it. Because The Nexus was a phenomenon wholly of The Rip, it meant the stranger was linked to the cataclysm. With Milius, the connection between the two phenomena was always obvious, however the evidence was circumstantial. But with the gauntlet's compass, that link was confirmed. The blurry light he saw in his astral netherworld was no neurological byproduct, no fabrication resulting from childhood trauma. Instead, it was a physical bearing, a location on a map; it was real.

"It's far more consistent than my eye's fuzzy reckoning," Milius admitted. "No ambiguity."

In a place that suffered a stagnant sun, no visible stars, and an impossibly tangled magnetic field, the stranger had the means to navigate sunward, a capability still flustering Sinister's natives. Was the Nexus a navigation beacon? While it lay near the sunward pole, it was off by hundreds of kilometers. Before they reached the swamp latitudes and its haze, they'd used a shadow compass, the solar sextant. But the method grew unreliable, and in the Salis Majora's diffuse sunlight, completely ambiguous. As such, Milius was their primary means of wayfinding.

"So, it's a compass."

“It has to be more than that.”

“Does it?”

“What about longitude?”

“We use triangulation, but it takes time and it’s a rough estimate. Very rough. Lots of noise. I can barely detect a signal now,” Roman said, nodding to his rucksack and the radio. ”Maybe the stranger used other means, something sophisticated, exotic—”

“—alien.”

“Or it’s simpler, an ancient Planetfall technology we used to possess but no longer. But we have something they don’t, our own cosmic dowser,” Hadrian nodded at Milius.

“Milius, you guessed a week out, maybe a bit further?” Dru asked.

“Just my intuition.”

“How many kilometers?”

“I would say—”

“—Parallax,” Roman interrupted, holding up the gauntlet. “That’s it! If I can take the gauntlet and spread out a measurable distance from Milius —maybe a kilometer or two— I should be able to triangulate The Nexus and calculate how far it is away.”

Dru wandered off to clear her mind. She looked out from the

observation deck at the desert below in the direction of the body. Like the Vespan and Tigan's ill-fated mapmakers, perhaps this stranger was a mapmaker as well, using his compass and other means to survey and plot waypoints through The Rip's vast maze. The stranger was an agent of The Rip, but in what capacity, Dru could only guess. Having a means of navigation meant he was a traveler. Because The Nexus was <u>their</u> destination did not mean it was necessarily the alien's.

"Any other theories, Dru?" Hadrian shouted after noticing she'd strayed from the quorum.

"No."

"Then what should we do?"

"Do what we've been doing. Do what we were sent here to do. Reach The Nexus."

But Dru didn't want to leave. The thought of abandoning the pioneer ship's safety for the salt flats and The Rip's labyrinth sunk her spirits. She wished for a repreive, to forget about the expedition for a time. And so she procrastinated. And while no one prodded her, she didn't urge their departure; the moment would come soon enough. Instead, she swam in the cool waters of the lake and napped in the darkness of her cabin. While they'd scavenged enough of the ship's protein reserves to stave off hunger, it wasn't sustainable. But for now, it bought time to

entertain less immediate worries.

Hadrian grew preoccupied with the teetering twin of the pioneer ship. He made several trips to explore it, looking for clues as to the disappearance of the hulk's surviving custodians. Because one of the tripods had collapsed –the one with ladders and foot ramps– he found no easy way inside, and climbing through its other struts was too dangerous. An open bay offered glimpses within, but the ramp had collapsed into a heap. A crane dangled half-way out, large enough to unload ground vehicles. Hadrian knew the pioneers must have deployed rovers. The tracks they identified had come from something.

After more incursions into the pitch black of the lower holds with no trace of a rover –not even a terrain cycle or a mono-track– they gave up searching. The jumbles of unrecognizable debris offered few clues. Vehicle assets were complimentary, not redundant. Interstellar colonial voyages were high risk ventures and to transport two of everything was an impossible luxury.

"They didn't float or fly away. And they weren't fools like ourselves, hauling everything on their backs," Hadrian admitted.

Two possibilities arose as to their disappearance. Most of the L'Estelo Mangus' hulks touched down at roughly the same time, within weeks or a month of one another. The survivors of this crash had no doubt tried to make contact with the others. The

antenna mast suffered no damage and the ship would have signaled via radio. Having made contact, the pioneer crew would have set out for the other colonies.

“But did they make it?” Hadrian wondered. “There’s no historical record I recall of a lost hulk reuniting with the Planetfall colonies. But my history’s fuzzy. That doesn’t mean it didn’t happen. It might’ve gotten lost in history’s dustbin.”

The second possibility was the custodians-turned-pioneers made a go of it in the Salis Majora, establishing a tenuous existence in the scorching polar heat. It would explain the tracks leading off in opposite directions. A hardscrabble colony could have been founded in the surrounding wasteland. But after a thousand kilometers in the Salis Majora, the idea seemed ludicrous to Dru. It was barren, sterile.

“A colony out here?” she scoffed. “The wet bulb temperature alone is ‘clipping lethal’, as you say, Hadrian. They’d have to have unreal genetics —or a mutation— to suffer this place.”

“Could the stranger be from a lost colony?” Roman speculated.

“Anything’s possible,” Milius said.

“Highly improbable,” Hadrian added, ”but not completely unthinkable. However they’d be so isolated, they would have reverted, not advanced.”

Dru shook her head, exasperated by everyone’s wild opinions

and wasted energy.

"Enough," she said. "We don't know anything right now."

The stranger's compass provided truth, a definitive at last; the Nexus was real. But Dru's uneasiness returned as more questions arose. She fought off her predilection for free-association and pattern seeking —manic coping in the midst of uncertainty. The endless 'what ifs' brought on tiring anxiety that robbed her appetite, a situation she could ill-afford.

"Why do you get to make the rules about what we do and don't talk about?" Roman argued.

"Because I lead this expedition, and we can't waste time talking about 'lost tribes' and other nonsense. Next we'll be arguing how magicians conjured The Rip, or we'll be musing about 'Baphomet's Bargain' like some pre-Schism Capricorn priest."

"—Give us more credit," Roman snapped back. "And waste time? That's all you've been doing for the past three wakes. Your leisurely swims haven't been helping us any."

Roman was right. While the others busied themselves with surveys, archaeology, and ad-hoc history, Dru stoked an ennui. Paralysis was a marginal survival tactic, it assumed predators lacked a sense of time or context; it assumed a static world. But her world wasn't static, and such tactics would fail. They were on borrowed time. She hoped a cosmic manna would grant her

revelation, that her psychedelic dream served a purpose, but no; that was all delusion, Black Rainbow transcendental nonsense. Pre-occupied or apathetic, not thinking about such things –under the guise of 'religious inspiration'– proved easier.

"Fine!" Hadrian interjected. "Enough about the stranger. We'll leave it be. Roman has been busy helping me. Dru, it's worth a listen."

Using the stranger's compass, Roman had indeed been busy helping Hadrian map the direction of the sunward rover tracks. Calculations showed them to be closely aligned with the Nexus. Hadrian lobbied that they follow the tracks, and Dru agreed. Out on the flats, Hadrian devised a method to identify the subsurface ruts. By rotating their polarized sun goggles, he showed they could filter reflections and reveal the ghostly lines below, but only in the smoother sections of the salt pan. The process was tedious and it worked poorly with diffuse shadows and dappled light.

"We'll leave in the next twelve hours," Dru declared.

Roman attempted to patch into the antenna mast. Unlike his radio kit's retractable whip, the pioneer ship –with its height advantage– offered greater range. Unfortunately, the connections had oxidized and the cable shielding had frayed. With no ability to receive or transmit to Vespera, he abandoned his unwieldy

radio kit. Using the stranger's compass, he no longer needed it to triangulate their position.

"We'll come back for it, maybe."

He wore the stranger's gauntlet, wielding it like a boy would a toy gun. Dru noticed him ready to clench and eject another sputtering lightning blast then reprimanded him. As weapons officer, the device belonged with her. But it was unwieldy, awkward, and strange. She deferred the burden to the radioman, instead. Unwise, but she wasn't up for another argument with Roman.

"I want to have a look at the body," Hadrian said.

"It's not enroute, Hadrian. What else do you need to know? Roman and I took comprehensive notes."

"That's why I want to investigate it myself. You described an interesting physiology. I have a theory."

"Baking in the heat, with that disease of his…" Dru shook her head. "—Do you really need to see it?"

"Humor me."

"It's a detour, lots of sun. What I said before still stands: if you drop out there, we're leaving you, and you'll turn out like <u>him</u> —like that thing," Dru warned, gesturing in the direction of the body. "Understood?"

"Well, I hope you'd do me the favor of shooting me first?"

Hadrian said facetiously, gazing down at Dru’s gun belt.

“Let’s get moving.”

They filled their canteens and packed protein powder. Without Roman’s radio, they could haul more. As the spheres obscured the horizon, Dru looked back at the metal and composite pyramids, despondent. Hadrian reassured her they could find the ships again, but it was little comfort. The ship felt like home now.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN: THE SPHERE

When they reached the stranger, he'd changed color to a mottled purple and red, his skin distended and tight. His eyelids had reopened, the milkiness replaced by bulging red blobs. Despite the suit's moldering, it had preserved the body like a pickle jar. But with it gone, the rot had accelerated. A swarm of brine fleas had broken through the desert's crust and swarmed his mouth and nose, enticed by the odor. Dru stood far enough back to keep the cloying reek at bay. Hadrian however, was enamored by the specimen. He took his time, able to temper the visceral offense with his curiosity.

"He's from somewhere else," Hadrian said. "Another world."

"Define 'world', Hadrian," Dru said.

"Not Sinister," Hadrian clarified. "A world with different

physics, a different gravity. The decay… it has muddled his physique, but his muscle mass –or lack thereof– would have a hard go at supporting his weight here. His joints are swollen, made worse by this disease, but that suit…" Hadrian paused, squinting.

"What about it?" Dru grew impatient.

"The knees are formed like artificial sinew –Dru, hand me your knife."

She unsheathed the blade and handed it to him.

He went to work slicing a strand of rubbery material from the leg's internal lining. He unfolded his reading glasses and pushed them onto his nose. Strands of silver thread woven into the semisoft ropey substance glinted in the sunlight. He hypothesized they acted like an electrical circuit, synthesized nerve tissue that controlled artificial muscles. Like Sinister's insects, the suit provided an exoskeleton for his weak extremities.

"This suit was designed to work in Sinister's gravity, to support this awkwardly slender man," Hadrian declared. "Which excludes the 'lost tribe' theory –Sorry Roman."

Roman shrugged.

"Okay," Dru sighed. "The stranger wasn't from Sinister –at least not the Sinister of the present– but someplace with weaker

gravity.”

“This would exclude the homeword,” Milius said. “Homworlder’s were shorter and stockier, but only slightly.”

Dru was again losing patience but forced herself to keep quiet. She did have to admit, however, that through the process of elimination, Hadrian deduced the stranger was not terrestrial, nor was he from Sinister’s future, present, or past. Traveling to the past defied physics, Hadrian had assured them.

“He could be from one of the two moons—”

“—Stop,” Dru said, her tolerance reached.

“—But Sinister’s moons are airless—”

“—Are we done with him?” Dru looked at Hadrian, impatient.

He nodded and handed back her knife. The component he’d cut away, he kept, stuffing it into one of the bulging pockets of his rucksack.

“Let’s move out.”

They marched along the faint tracks. The stranger’s body was near the savannah’s border, close to where The Rip resembled a bubbly forest. The desert was starting to break up, as it had near the hulks. The warped ground and swaths of shadow complicated things. Hadrian fidgeted with his goggles to catch the proper light but had little luck.

“If we get bogged down finding the path, we’re heading directly for The Nexus, understand?” Dru said, noticing Hadrian’s worry.

“Dru,” Roman said. “Hand me your binoculars.”

“Why?”

“I see something up ahead,” he paused, “something strange.”

“We’re thick with ‘strange’ at present,” Dru said, pulling the field glasses out and handing them to Roman.

The radioman adjusted the binoculars' dials. He tried to describe what he saw but struggled to find words.

“Another stranger, maybe,” Roman muttered. “Not sure what else it could be.

“It’s Ludoviko. It has to be,” Dru said, pulling her pistol from her holder.

“Ludoviko? It’s been a week,” Hadrian said, his face pinched. “Is he dead?”

“Not moving.”

Dru trotted out to investigate. She saw a shape that didn’t belong. It looked like part of someone, but the body was partially obscured by a boulder-sized sphere.

“Ludoviko.”

She spotted her discarded rifle and jogged over to grab it. Picking it up, she checked the breach. All the rounds had been

fired. Behind her, glints of brass shells littered the salt pan. With no ammunition, the rifle was just added weight. She tossed it to the desert floor and drew her pistol, cocking the hammer as she sidestepped towards the unmoving Tigan.

What she saw didn't make sense, like an optical illusion. Laying on his belly, Ludoviko's head was impossibly tucked into his elbow. Dru moved closer, squinting to focus in the muted light. His jumpsuit was torn to his waist, exposing a blistered pink 'V' where the sun scorched his back. The sunburn was grievous. Reflected light teased detail from the shadows and revealed the scope of the horror. Ludoviko's right arm and head were gone, vanished within the sphere.

Like Milius's eyeball, part of Ludoviko had been consumed. From the sphere, a biomechanical tentacle had a hold of him, tightly gripping his left armpit in a hydraulic clench. His shoulder had been dislocated into a stomach churning kink. The tentacle tore his flesh away. Dribbles of blood spotted the ground. A spurt of bile filled Dru's mouth.

The others had caught up. Dru asked Milius if he could see anything with his left eye, an anomaly or a disturbance. Milius shook his head. Hadrian walked around the sphere —careful to keep his distance— and noticed robotic feet protruding and digging into the crust.

“There’s a spider inside.”

Dru holstered her pistol and unsheathed her knife. She tried to slip the flat of the blade in between Ludoviko’s scapula and the black surface. Careful to avoid the tentacle’s coil, she deftly pushed the tip to his flesh near the interface. Pressing hard, she accidentally stabbed him. Blood spurted onto the knife and part of her hand. The Tigan kicked violently. Dru yelped and jumped back, falling onto her backside. She scooted away and fumbled for her pistol.

“By the priests of Capricorn… he’s alive!” Hadrian exclaimed.

Ludoviko continued to kick, digging trenches into the crust with his feet as salt caked his knees. With his free hand he pushed against the sphere in futility. After a minute he relaxed. The mechanical appendage constricted tighter.

“I feel sick,” Roman said, aghast.

The sphere was a mouth, and the spider’s proboscis its tongue; Ludoviko was being swallowed alive. Dru got back to her feet, holstered her pistol, and picked up her blade. She tapped the sphere’s surface. It made a ‘click’, just like all the other spheres she’d smacked and hit. Gripping the knife’s hilt with both hands, she leaned into it. Feet dug in, forearms braced by her chest, she pushed the blade. A loud grunt escaped her.

The sphere gave way, its obsidian surface penetrated, if only

slightly. She yelled for the others to brace her as she leaned harder. Roman crowded in and shouldered her back. The knife sank a few more centimeters. She held fast until the strain proved to be too much. Pulling back, Dru relaxed her grip, hands sweaty and cramped. The sphere ejected the knife as if spring-loaded.

“How did it pull him in?” Hadrian exclaimed.

“It didn’t, obviously. Not all the way,” Dru said.

The spider was strong, but not strong enough. To have tugged on him for as long as it had, hinted at hydraulics fueled by a limitless reservoir. But even then, it should have torn Ludoviko apart.

“It was trying to abduct him,” Roman said.

“Delfino told me how one of the spiders had gone after them. They’d managed to shoo it away, but this one seems to have gotten the better of Ludoviko,” Dru explained.

“After Ludoviko killed the stranger, he must have noticed the spider and went after it. My view through the telescope was obstructed. I didn’t see what happened.” Milius looked back in the direction of the pioneer ships.

“But The Rip is inert,” Dru declared.

“Apparently not. What about the bullets?” Hadrian reminded her.

Dru patted her pocket then pulled out the rusted fragments.

“That bullet, and the bullet that maniac fired into Milius’s eyeball, made it through,” Hadrian continued. “So, it’s obviously possible.”

The science institute conducted experiments on spheres of all sizes, employing every modality of force. Nothing was successful. With her bare hands and a knife, she’d succeeded where Vespera’s industrial might had failed. The spheres were fantastically solid with a hardness equal to a neutron star. Explosives, projectiles, geological drills, hydraulic vices capable of flattening alloys to angstroms, plasma torches, super-sonic water knives, etc… Nothing. But now.

“Things change, Dru,” Hadrian suggested. “And the threshold for mechanically ‘tunneling’ into The Rip may be a variable. You obviously don’t have the explosive force of a high-powered rifle round, yet you were able to make headway,” Hadrian said, gesturing to the half-swallowed Ludoviko.

“Shouldn’t we be having this philosophical discussion another time? We need to do something to help this wretch. We can’t just leave him in this… thrall,” Milius said, his voice wavering.

“He’s cemented in and a tug-of-war would rip him in two,” Dru exclaimed. “And why do you care? He nearly blew your skull apart.”

“I don’t know,” Milius replied, squatting next to Ludoviko.

“It’s inhuman to leave him to suffer. We should be better than him.”

“Maybe we’re not,” Dru snapped, growing frustrated. “Maybe we’re just as more, or amoral, as our Tigan brothers.”

Ludoviko was lodged in like a parasite. Extrication would kill him. Trying to reach into the astral void was a feat of strength they collectively did not possess. Even if they could get an arm in, they couldn’t wrestle him free from the spider’s hydraulic proboscis.

“Take it.” Dru chambered a pistol round. “There’s three bullets left –that’s it– and who knows what else is lurking around here. So, get close and aim for the heart. Don’t waste the shot.”

“I… “ Milius stammered, his eyes wide and mouth quivering.

“Do it, Milius,” Dru snarled. “By the priests of Capricorn, you’d be doing him a favor, the miserable sadist. It’s better than the bastard deserves. Now, come on!”

“-Stop Dru,” Roman whimpered, reaching out as if to ward the pistol away. “You’re scaring everyone.”

Milius stepped back, mouth open. Dru held the pistol out, grip first. After a minute, she gave up and spun the gun back around her index finger, squeezing the grip.

“Cowards, the lot of you,” Dru said, eyes beaming at the

splayed Ludoviko. “How ‘bout you Roman?” she said, turning to the cowering radioman. “Why don’t you show me what you’re made of and stop being a boy.”

“Dru. I can’t,” Roman timidly replied, eyes filled with wet, chest throbbing. “Don’t…”

“Go easy,” Hadrian pleaded. “Don’t be rash, Druscilla.”

“And you, Hadrian… don’t patronize me. You’re no doubt the reason we’re in this situation.”

“Me?”

“Yes, you,” Dru said, hand jostling her pistol grip. “You and I need to have a conversation. Alone.”

“Right now? Where?”

“Come with me.”

She turned and marched into the spheres, yelling at Hadrian to follow. After some mumbling protests, the scientist shuffled along behind her. A few hundred meters on, they entered a clearing. Dru turned to face Hadrian. He threw up his hands in exasperated confusion. But it was all an act; he lacked the social graces and clandestine nuance needed for subterfuge; her casual encounters with Tajigo’s spy network had taught her as much. Exhausted by their circumstance —specifically Hadrian’s play-acted ignorance— Dru needed him to admit it.

“Are you planning on killing me now?” Hadrian taunted.

“Confess,” Dru demanded, still holding her pistol. “I want you to admit it.”

“Admit what?” Hadrian half-laughed.

“How did the Tigan’s know about Milius?”

“Everyone knew about Milius.”

“Sure, but not to the degree that those Tigans knew about Milius.”

“What did Delfino tell you?”

“What do you think he told me?”

After a moment, Hadrian sighed in exasperation.“It was nothing,” he whined. “It doesn’t matter now, anyways. Delfino’s dead, Milius is unharmed… and Ludviko, well… here we are. All’s well that ends well.”

“Yes. Here we are, all well,” Dru said, straining to keep her voice calm and unbroken, a wet grip on the pistol. “Hadrian, what did you give Tajigo?”

“Nothing.”

“Enough!” Dru shouted.

“Just that worthless dossier and Milius’s physiology report. None was worth much,” Hadrian admitted, refusing to look Druscilla in the eyes. “It was common knowledge by then.”

“What else?”

“That was it! Honest!”

Dru shook her head. “No. You gave them more.”

“Fine!”

Hadrian went on to confess. A Tigan spy, working out of the science institute’s field logistics, had approached Hadrian, aware of his candidacy for the expedition. The dossier, in itself, wasn’t enough for what Urbo was offering him: all the geophysical survey and morphology statistics, a tantalizing data set, science that could re-legitimize his career. To obtain it, Hadrian was forced to produce more on Milius, exploiting university databases to unearth his psychological background, including the details of Milius’s mother’s suicide.

“The data they gave me was total rubbish!” Hadrian admitted. “It was a scam! The theories didn’t close, the statistics weren’t correlated. Buffoonery! It was just pattern-seeking nonsense. ”

“Why, by the high priests of Capricorn, Hadrian?” Dru couldn’t fathom it. “You sold us out!”

“It wasn’t on the wires. They were keeping it a secret. I had to know,” Hadrian whimpered. “I thought they’d found something, something important. I thought they’d found the kernel for Sinister’s magnetic fractal nodes. I thought their survey data might prove my old theories. I had a chance to publish it, and maybe my colleagues –the department– would take me seriously

again.”

Dru sighed.

She believed him, as absurd as the notion was. Hadrian had only an unrelenting loyalty to himself. The physical world, with its limitless punitive tortures, held no consequence for him; he didn’t care. He was enslaved to his will, obsessed with his own legitimacy. Dru gripped the gun, realizing its empty threat.

“What else did you give them?”

“Our squawk frequency,” Hadrian whispered.

“Our beacon?” Dru shouted. “Baphomet’s bargain, Hadrian! Why? What did you think was going to happen?”

“I thought they’d give up, aimless in this salty hell. I didn’t think they’d find us.”

“And you had the gall to accuse me of conspiring with Tajigo…”

“—I thought that you’d…”

“-Enough!”

Incredulous, Dru paced about, not knowing what to do. Angry, she gripped her pistol tighter, closed her eyes and felt the burn of the sun. Delfino and the Tigans might have died regardless, wandering the Salis Majora on rumor, but at least it wouldn’t have been by her hand.

“What are you gonna do?” Hadrian pleaded.

“Mop up your mess” Dru said, cocking the pistol and loading a

round. “By Baphomet’s hand, ‘As above, so below’.”

“Dru?”

She marched off back through the spheres the way they’d come. Brushing past Roman and stepping around Milius, squatting, head slung, she pulled the trigger. The report echoed through the spheres. Ludoviko went limp. A fine sputter of red coated the salt pan. The spider within made a few sudden tugs with its appendage then let go of the Tigan completely. Its proboscis receded into The Rip’s netherworld. The sphere ejected the rest of Ludoviko, the shape again indistinguishable from the surrounding multitudes.

Every vessel in his eyes had burst. Blood mixed with saliva poured from a mouth of broken teeth, framing his distended tongue. Roman honed in on a mechanically shaved patch of the Tigan’s scalp. Three puncture holes —as if made by a large gauge syringe— were marked with purple dye. Someone, or something, had been in his skull. Roman leaned in for a closer look. Dru stood back and breathed deeply, trying to gather her wits. Numb, she said nothing. After a few moments, Dru calmed herself, breathing deep steady breaths. The others gathered their wits and wandered in closer to inspect the macabre scene.

“What the hell was going on in there?” Roman blurted. “Milius, are you sure you didn’t see anything inside The Rip?”

He shook his head. “Just shadows and The Nexus.”

“The spider —or whomever— must have given him water and oxygen,” Roman said, lingering over the body.

“Did the spider do this, or was there something else inside with him?”

“Not sure,” Milius replied.

What The Rip wanted with him was anyone’s guess. The spiders were a tool, but to what capacity? The other spiders —inoperable and malfunctioning— were alone, or abandoned. Someone had programmed the robots to hunt. But to what end? Milius’s eyeball lay inside The Rip, like Ludoviko’s entire head. However, The Rip had formed around Milius’s visual organ while Ludoviko’s whole head had been pulled inside. The Tigan might have had a clarity Milius lacked, optical information preserved in translation. Milius’s view was most likely filtered —information corrupted as it transited a space-time membrane— while Ludoviko’s sight was pure, his brain and senses sharing a simultaneous astral reality.

“What’s on the other side?”

“Could be anything.”

The spheres, no longer inert, were now a menace, each sphere a possible trap, hiding monsters ready to pounce. They were permeable membranes masking danger. Nowhere on the face of

Sinister was safe, the empty quarters of the Salis Majora, the safety of Novum Pax… none of it. The Rip was ubiquitous.

Milius tore a remnant from the Tigan’s jumpsuit and covered Ludoviko’s face. The shroud wasn’t much, but it was all the dignity they could afford.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN: THE RIFT

Sunlight faded. Dru removed her sun goggles. The Rip’s density was similar to zones they’d traversed before, but here the vertical extent was vast. High above, pixelated helixes stretched into the blinding haze. The formations gave Dru the impression of static waves crashing against an invisible shore. Because of the gradients, the light that reached them shifted into a diffuse overcast.

Even with the muggy air, Dru felt curiously chilled. The temperature change was minor, but with no direct sunlight the searing rays were held at bay. The spheres, despite the ‘Ludoviko event’, were still physically inert, barely absorbing and reflecting the sun. And while the shade was welcome, the change left Dru unnerved. The Rip had become a forest canopy,

and she felt like prey, eyes and ears alert to any stalkers lurking above.

Dru didn’t mention Hadrian’s deceit to the others; it would change nothing and only serve to break down cohesion. Dru knowing was punishment enough. Hadrian’s face –more flush and sweaty than usual– revealed a chronic embarrassment. It also gave her unsaid leverage. Dru concluded that to know his plight was impossible; she didn’t really want to understand it. A distracted savant, the scientist lacked loyalty or an ideology. When it came to her interactions with Hadrian, she focused on logistics and the immediacy of their situation. Gradually a more subdued version of their prior rapport returned.

In the shadows, the scientist had trouble locating the path with his polarized lenses. The patches of sun were too few, and he quickly lost the rovers’ tracks. Using their map and a piece of string, they determined direction using the gauntlet’s indicator correlated to footstep counts. This method proved even slower. And as The Rip’s deck descended, the exercise grew tedious.

Preoccupied with his orienteering, Roman collided with a sphere, bounced, tripped, and fell. The first few times were amusing. However, fissures and cracks in the salt pan posed a danger of serious injury. After another tumble and bruised knee,

Dru admonished the radioman and Hadrian, ordering them to stop. They did so with only mild complaints. After a few more kilometers, the spheres had fully dropped to the desert floor.

Their route resembled a claustrophobic passage of caverns or canyons. The Rip had mostly been a surface-level phenomena. As such, Dru felt reassured that just a few meters above was open sky, and like a butterfly, she could flutter up and be free from the blight. Looking up at the dizzying undulations, Dru instead felt like a crustacean skittering through the murk of a lake bottom. The way was congested. To squeeze through the narrower gaps, they had to remove their rucksack and side-step. Dru’s breathing increased. Her abdomen cramped and her chest tightened. She imagined a spider reaching out from the black and grabbing her.

They found a small glade and camped near a fissure filled with brack. A column of spheres reduced the light to a pale gray. With no direct sun, they fired up the sodium stove reclaimed from the fallen Tigans. The stove’s water still was quick but low capacity, and the spigot temperature was boiling. Wishing she’d tea —or any flavor at all— Dru sipped her canteen and tried to imagine a citrus fragrance, anything to ward off the milden stink.

They laid out their sleeping mats. Now more vigilant, Dru set

up a watch with Roman being the first. Unable to sleep, she lay on her side and watched the radioman. He sat cross-legged, her pistol laying in his lap. The quiet roared, the ringing in her ears amplified like feedback. Roman noticed Dru staring but tried to ignore her, but boredom drove him to conversation.

"Dru?" he whispered.

"Yes, Roman."

"When the Rip appeared, people described having a reaction, like an irrational fear. They had a word for it, but I can't remember—"

"-Trypophobia."

He snapped his fingers. "That's it! I've been trying to remember that word since we left the pioneer ships."

Trypophoba was a fear that gained notoriety with The Rip's appearance. The phobia was different from the general dread suffered with the appearance of the cataclysm. Technically, it was a fear of patterns with irregular holes or bumps. Psychologists believed the phobia stemmed from a revulsion to visible disease; poxes, parasites, fungal and bacterial infections. The Rip was a disease, a disease affecting Sinister's living landscapes. From above it resembled an infestation. And like the egg skeins of a parasite, it was starting to expel its hatchlings. The spheres were in the

billions, so many that its astral agents would overwhelm Sinister like a plague.

“You don’t seem afraid of The Rip, Roman.”

“I’m not. More the opposite.”

“How so?”

“Without The Rip, I wouldn’t be here talking to you,” the radioman said, gazing up into the multitudes.

“None of us would be here, Roman,” Dru said, befuddled.

“I guess that’s not how I meant it.”

“Then what did you mean?”

“The Rip… I don’t want to go back to the way it was before.”

“Before you stole away?” Dru said, propping herself up on elbow, her interest piqued.

“Before that even.”

“Before when?”

Roman described his escape from his charterhouse, the circumstances of which Dru was unaware. Faking his credentials to join the expedition was one thing, but abandoning his work clan risked exile beyond the Tajigo Meridian. Stationed in the Solar Barrens at a remote site, his disappearance from the colony mine wasn’t exactly a premeditated act. In fact, it was hard to blame him in light of the circumstance. Things being what they were, the hope was that Roman would be afforded

leniency when he returned to Novum Pax. Re-introduction into proper Vespan society as an orphan was unheard of, a lengthy genetic analysis was required, and the cost was money most didn’t possess. Sponsorship was typically needed along with a decree by the ministry.

“I hated the charterhouse. We all hated it.”

Sinister was awash in gold, a result of a supernova jet impact when the planet had formed. However, palladium, which was industrially valuable, was commingled with the gold ore. Smelters separated the metals, and with only so much left to gild in Vespera, surplus gold ingots were stacked and stored.

“The shine from the pallets would blind us when we moved them outside the polishing high bay,” Roman mentioned. “It was all meant for some exotic telescope, but no one ever bothered. It just sat there. A shame really.”

A large reactor was used to power the mining machinery and furnaces. When The Rip appeared, the spheres lodged in one of its condenser tunnels and blocked the cooling water. Before a caterpillar team could dig a new shaft to reroute the flow, it went into meltdown and caught fire, then exploded. Help didn’t arrive for wakes. In the confusion, Roman hid aboard an automated rail carryall.

“An emancipated orphan friend helped me when I got to Novum

Pax, fake credentials and all that, including an engineering degree. I even had a job, but it was only a matter of time before the praetorians were going to catch onto me. So, I volunteered for the expedition. I was the chapterhouse communications operator, so the whole radio thing came to me naturally."

For Dru, The Rip had been an ominous harbinger, but for Romam The Rip was a 'deus ex machina,' a lucky break, liberation from the life he'd been dealt. He was a soft-spoken acolyte of the phenomena. Dismissed by Dru as naivete, his idealism was steeped in the belief of the cataclysm's transformative powers. Dru's anxiety allowed her no such grace; The Rip was a catastrophe. But for Roman, the expedition was a pilgrimage. A part of him, Dru could tell, wanted to commune with the Rip's creators, whatever or whomever they were. And as a sacrifice, Roman offered up Sinister's status quo.

"So, you think The Rip was a good thing?" Dru asked.

"I don't know. I'm not afraid of it; I know that much. It helped me. It gave me my freedom."

"Be careful," Dru said, rolling onto her back to gaze into the dizzying kaleidoscope of circles that spiraled into the sky.

"What do you mean?"

"'As above, so below', cult think, the belief that forces the

universe to abide by our morality. The universe doesn't care."

Roman shook his head. Dru didn't mean to be so negative, but it was an honest answer.

"The Rip is a physical phenomena," Dru continued. "So are the strangers and the spider-robots. We just don't understand it; that's all. But it's not supernatural, even though our brains scream the opposite," Dru said, trying more so to convince herself.

Dru's eyes grew heavy. Sleepiness gave way to yawns. Roman kept talking as she drifted off. Then she heard her name.

"Dru. I'm sorry."

"What?" She opened her eyes, sleep clinging to her brain. "Sorry for what?"

"I didn't mean to yell at you, about not believing Milius."

"And I didn't mean to belittle you in front of the others," Dru replied, referring to her dressing down of the boy during the ugly Ludoviko 'event.

"It's okay."

"But you were right, and I was wrong." Dru's words faded to a slur.

"It's just that…. You and me. I… I…"

"What Roman?" Dru half-slurred.

"It's just…"

Dru fell asleep.

The psychedelic dreams started but were muted. The sky inverted. Whites and blacks swapped to form a starfield. The vision was one that only explorers and astronomers had managed while wandering Sinister's ice cap. She swam into the depths of space and reached out to grab a pinprick of light. The stars were close and they felt hot. She caught one in her hand, the heat burned. She let go and awoke.

"Dru?"

Someone shook her. Roman, Hadrian, and Milius stood looking down at her. They were ready to go, their rucksacks on their backs.

"We let you sleep. But after an hour, we got impatient… nervous," Hadrian said, looking around. "My apologies. We know you're tired. Milius fired up the sodium stove and distilled water."

"Thanks, Milius. And it's fine. You should've gotten me up for watch," Dru said, rubbing the stickiness from her eyes. She was embarrassed, and Milius needed the rest. Now he'd be rundown; his left eye more ambiguous and blurry than ever.

"Roman scouted in the direction of the Nexus while you slept—" Hadrian started.

"—That was dangerous. You could've ended up like Marcus,

lost," Dru said. She was about to lecture them, but had no energy. "Did you come across anything?"

"The Rip is changing."

"Changing how?"

"It's hard to describe. It's aligning itself –I'm not sure." Roman struggled to explain.

"Roman, tell her about the other thing?" Hadrian said.

"Salt angels."

"Salt angels?" Dru replied. "This far out? We haven't seen a salt angel for wakes, maybe a week. Hadrian, I thought you said –"

"–Yes. We've traveled beyond their migratory limit –or so I thought. Their redds have completely disappeared. This far sunward the desert is essentially sterile except for tiny subsurface animals. Any migratory fauna shouldn't be capable of surviving out here. But that wasn't the oddest thing Roman came across," Hadrian explained.

"The oddest thing," Roman started," was that the salt angels were migrating in reverse?"

"I don't understand."

"Away from the Nexus. Shadoward. Which should be impossible as they've already laid their eggs and gone off to die. There must be something else out here," Hadrian said, eyes wide, hair and

scraggly beard more expressive than usual.

“Maybe they’re just confused.”

Dru packed her gear, had a few squeezes from a pouch of premixed protein ooze and let Roman lead the way. The going was slow, but kilometers on, Roman pointed out the anomalies he’d tried to describe.

The Rip was fluctuating, its density and vertical extent formed static waves at regular intervals. In the troughs, The Rip manifested as it had before, thinner with blinding sunlight interspersed. Another few kilometers and the waves’ crests heaved skyward into pixels. By the time they camped, the waves started to bend in a gentle arc, stretching from horizon to horizon.

“Like a stone plunking in a bucket of water,” Hadrian remarked. “We’ve traveled through a shock front, a barrier between order and disorder, like fluid that’s transitioned out of turbulence.”

Hadrian took temperature and pressure readings with the salvaged remnants of his weather station. He noted they’d reached an ‘inflection’. The air pressure dipped such that solar intensity no longer increased with air temperature. The sky’s hazy white was now a pastel blue. They tried to sleep, still water, and worked on finding their next heading.

The waves grew more consistent. Milius identified The Nexus more easily, his bearings aligned with the stranger's gauntlet. They were heading in the direction of the emanation point, the center of the Rip's concentric ripple. Hadrian prattled on, pondering mathematical functions, perturbation constructs, the 'Helmholz equation', 'Radon transforms'… but it was all lost on Dru. She preferred his 'drops in a water bucket' description.

The flats broke apart, morphing into badlands. Mineral spires like teeth interrupted the flats. Ridges and fissures sliced through the strata, stretching for kilometers. The salt pan's tessellated white was now distorted and warped. Hadrian mentioned the moons' tidal forces and the pull of the sun. Bulging hills transformed The Rip into an illusion. What seemed distant was actually close and vice-versa. Flat desert was now an ambiguous topography. All of it made for slow going.

They camped near a flutter of salt angles. Dru watched the creatures negotiate the spheres with little effort. Light and nimble, the ethereal beings weaved and bobbed as if in a dance. Mesmerized, she failed to notice a blob of reddish-brown juxtaposed with the black orbs and white desert. Dru drew her pistol and took Roman to scout it out. Creeping closer, the mound resolved. It was a relic, a vehicle dissolved into a rusted slag heap.

“It’s a rover from the pioneer ships,” Roman said, kicking at a warped oval encrusted with a pattern of yellow bumps. “It’s a wheel. There’s the lugs. And look, you can still see the tracks.” He scuffed the salt pan to expose the ruts below.

“Dead reckoning. We found it,” Dru said in disbelief. She lifted her sun goggles to have a closer look.

They camped next to the rover so Hadrian and Roman could investigate while on watch. With centuries worth of salt exposure and atmospheric corrosion, the alloys had rusted into a monolithic blob. The ebb and flow of brack left behind piles of salt inside the vehicles compartments. All its components had deteriorated to such an extreme, little could be gleaned archaeologically. Hadrian guessed it was an articulated chassis with eight wheels, four on the forward driver’s cab and a wagon aft for cargo.

“It was too heavy,” Hadrian said. “This one sank into the crust, got stuck, and was abandoned. Even if they had made a go for the liminal colonies, this rover would have eventually bogged down.”

“To say nothing of the swamp latitudes. Not sure how you drive through marsh using wheels or tracks. Boats only.”

Roman volunteered for the first watch and asked to borrow Dru’s knife to pick at the rover. She obliged and unrolled her

mat near Milius, who sat panning his left eye about, honing his Nexus gaze.

"What do you see?"

"It's bigger with smaller lights orbiting it like an orrery. The lights move, but shadows move across the lights as well. I see human shapes –an arm, a leg maybe– not sure. Sometimes animals. But the more I stare, the less sense it makes. Sometimes in my periphery, I see glints and tracers."

"Do you have a sense about it?" Dru asked.

"It feels… synthetic."

"'Synthetic'?"

"Man-made," Milius answered. "More than the mathematical outcomes of physical phenomena."

The idea that The Rip was an artifact wasn't new –it was in the vast mix of ideas– but the theory was a poor contrivance. The math didn't add up. The science institute tried to calculate the energy required to generate The Rip, but the spheres were impossible. They hovered, and as such, their density wasn't measurable. So mass estimates were based on inertia. Displacement energy was also estimated, but The Rip didn't displace mass, it consumed it. And while the spheres only reflected a sliver of visible and infrared light, not much could be culled spectrally. No molecular emissions were observed,

muography was pointless, and nothing could be detected at microwave frequencies. Having something exist so inert made speculation about The Rip's origins –manmade or not– futile.

"Maybe you're seeing the strangers. Maybe they live inside like we live on Sinister," Dru wondered.

"But there's nothing. A vacuum," Milius said, laying down to stare into the sky. "Nothing except the Nexus."

Dru fell asleep to 'clinking' as Roman picked at the vehicle's ossified residue. For once, her dreams were quiet, and when Hadrian woke her, she wondered if she'd been asleep at all. She sat on her mat and fidgeted with her pistol, taking it apart, inspecting it and reassembling it. Hadrian quickly fell asleep. With the thin atmosphere, Dru's breathing and blood flow increased, making her tinnitus worse. But over the ringing, she heard a 'hiss'.

She cupped her ears and spun about. The noise was directional. She picked up the gauntlet next to Roman and slid her forearm into it, the sensation heavy and strange. She referenced the indicator using an offset bearing and started to walk.

The whisper expanded into a rush. No modulation. The echoes from the spheres scrambled direction. But the noise's volume proved adequate to keep her bearings. A half kilometer on, she discovered the source. The sound had expanded, now accompanied

by a deep modulating bass.

"By the high priests of Capricorn…"

Dru stood at the edge of a cliff. Below, a valley stretched to the horizon, a massive rift in the planet's crust. Underfoot, a cave gushed water into free space. The waterfall plunged into a lake on the rift's floor. The Rip created a roof above everything, leaving an empty volume below free of obstruction. Copra palms towered along the shoreline, partially hidden by a thin mist. Smaller plants and bushes crowded close to the water. Some flora was recognizable, some of it not. The area had been seeded. Nothing else could explain it.

Dru scanned the landscape with her field glasses. The lake continued on for kilometers until narrowing into a canyon sunward. Flutters of big and bright salt angels danced over the lake. The lake's ecology offered rich feeding grounds, even more than the fluvial latitudes. Things weren't just surviving, they were thriving. Mixed in were Sinister's lesser creatures: armored slugs, sand anemones, palm barnacles, jellies, and worms. A scarab lizard the size of a child sunbathed on a flat rock near the lake, a creature Dru had only seen in zoos. Its decoupled eyes, separated by a floppy turquoise comb, scanned the wave ripples. It pitched its head then stood prone on its forelegs. In a blur, it snatched a crustacean from the shallows.

A thin curling tongue reeled a mud shrimp into its wide jaws. The lizard gulped its prey. Its throat bulged and rippled as the doomed creature struggled in futility. Another gulp and all was still.

Wealthy families kept reptiles as pets, fragile turtles, snakes, and tiny camouflage lizards you could hold in your hand. Direct descendants from the homeworld, they were forever domesticated, too frail for Sinister's wilderness. She remembered learning that reptiles evolved from eating insects. So diminutive and frail, Dru thought the notion funny. But here in the rift, the lizards were distorted and mammoth. They'd escaped Sinister's evolutionary traps and had found a niche.

She walked along the rim. A chorus of croaks and hums replaced the noise from the falls. So loud, the valley had to be host to hundreds of animal colonies. Dru sat and dangled her legs over the cliffs. To sit normally was a luxury. Taking a sip from her canteen, she had a good look about.

Tubular columns of granite, atop a mantle of layered basalt, formed the valley walls. Tucked into the cracks, tarry plants found a home; their pale green fronds dappled the bleached walls with a muted color. Near the rim, salt crust frosted the rocks, leaching a slow drip of saline. Its streams formed white fingers that crept towards the gardens below. Through her binoculars,

she saw flashes of movement everywhere; the place was thick with fauna. The valley held a rich hybrid ecology. To study it would take time. She thought of Hadrian, then remembered she'd deserted her watch.

In a panic, Dru jumped up, dusted the salt from her legs, and followed the indicator's reverse compass heading. The rift wasn't far from their camp, and the reddish rover wreckage was easy to spot. When she returned, only Hadrian was awake, his face sour. She felt the hypocrite, but the rift discovery would soon make him forget her dereliction.

She tapped the radioman's shoulder with her boot. He pulled the earphones out and clicked a button on his wind-up audio device, muting the lulling sounds of the homeworld. She dropped the gauntlet next to him and snatched her knife back.

"Wake up."

"You've been off somewhere, Druscilla," Roman said, rubbing the sleep from his eyes.

"That, I have."

Milius awoke with an expression of pleasant surprise, defying his disfigurement. Dru could tell she'd provoked something; she was in a good mood.

"Druscilla," Milius smirked. "I remember that smile back at the science institute. A courteous formality, but this one is

genuine. What's come over you?"

Embarrassed, she felt flush, her smile dampened. Doubting herself, she questioned whether the rift was in fact real or some overheated hallucination.

"Are you feeling okay, Druscilla?" Hadrian stared at her warily.

"I'm fine, Hadrian," she snapped. "I've found something."

She recounted everything and offered a theory that it was the pioneer ship that had seeded the valley. "The rover was ferrying in between the two places when it got stuck," she said, nodding at the dissolved heap. "They must have settled the rift. It's thousands of hectares, and I only saw a portion of it."

Roman laughed.

"What's so funny?" Dru snapped.

"Milius…" Roman started. "You said we'd follow him even if he concocted stories about paradise –'waterfalls and guava trees'– because we were <u>that</u> desperate. And now…" Roman said, with derisive tone. "Maybe we should designate you the expedition's 'sear'."

"Roman, why are you mocking me?–"

"–Alright! Enough!" Hadrian interrupted, rolling up his sleeping mat. "There's one way to settle this. Dru. Please lead the way."

They stuffed their rucksacks and left, not bothering to still water or apply sun paste. Dru led the hurried march. As they walked, she grew worried; she didn't hear the waterfall. She stopped to listen but heard only the ringing in her ears. She dodged and wove through the spheres. The others shouted at her to slow down.

"You're going to lose us!"

"Stop!"

The spheres fell away and they were at the rift's edge. Dru sighed and bent over, hands on knees, eyes closed. She heard the others shuffling past her and then a few gasps.

"Where's the waterfall? I only see a whirlpool," Roman said. "But everything else… you weren't joking."

Dru pulled out her binoculars and passed them around, pointing out the landmarks. The waterfall had slowed to a trickle. Hadrian guessed the inflow and outflow was tidal, caused by the shifting of Sinister's moons that sloshed water around deep porous aquifers. Timed with the orbits of Sinister's moons, the waterfall would start again –Hadrian was certain– and the whirlpool would dissipate as the currents switched.

Above, The Rip's waves continued in striped patterns, converging somewhere over the horizon in the direction of The Nexus. Its shadows created washboard patterns in the mist on the

valley floor.

“There must be a way down. The pioneers seeded it. They must have spent a considerable amount of time working this place,” Dru said.

“Seeded it? I wouldn’t be so hasty with your theory,” Hadrian argued. “We’ll need more evidence.”

“Why do you doubt me, Hadrian?” Dru scoffed.

“We can’t be hasty, Dru. We need to be methodical.”

Dru ignored him.

They followed the rim to an outcrop of salt-caked boulders. On the other side was a switchback trail leading down the cliffs to the valley floor. The surrounding salt pan was stained gray and yellow. Climbing atop a boulder, Dru could see the criss-cross tracks of the rover’s ruts, extending shadoward.

“This was the end of the road. This is where they parked.”

The cliff path was steep and eroded, too narrow for anything other than a person on foot. To avoid the ledge, they shimmied along and hugged the granite walls. Spiny limbs of creosote bush raked their legs as they tried to avoid the sticky plants. Beetles scurried out from unseen burrows and quickly returned. One of the insects caught Dru off guard, prompting her to yelp.

“They’re harmless, Druscilla,” Hadrian chided. “They look like cousins of the yucca scarabs back in Vespera. Non-venemous.”

The rift was an island in the vast expanse of the Salis Majora, its hydrology and climate static since Planetfall. Its creatures had evolved from the holds of whatever survived the hulk crash, whether they'd made their own way here or were introduced. A few had probably drifted in from Sinister's liminal zones, having survived the journey by some remote chance. For most living things, the salt desert was death. The Salis Majora's ecology consisted of nothing more than spawned-out salt angels, fleas, a lost isopod or two, and rumored cryptids.

Hadrian's dismissal made her angry. Time, and the rift's isolated micro-ecology, might have evolved a menace; he wouldn't know. Wary, she gripped her pistol in its holster, fingered her knife, and kept her eyes moving.

After an hour, they arrived at the bottom. Milius and Hadrian nursed their knees, taking a seat on a clump of rocks. Hiking the steep terrain caught them off guard. They rested and took in their surroundings. On cue, as Hadrian predicted, the waterfall started to flow again. The roar filled the valley, muting the buzz and chirps. Hadrian watched the gushing water, mesmerized. He was mapping out lunar trajectories in his head —Dru could tell— three-body problems, sophisticated tidal calculations, fluid dynamics… The scientist looked down at his feet.

"This caliche…" Hadrian dug into the dried clay next to a scrubby sage. "It must have taken the pioneer terraformers years to convert this environment. Botanical geniuses. Incremental steps, deliberately planned, and executed…"

"—Maybe not," Dru said, acting the contrarian. "Maybe this place found its own balance."

"Life does find a way," Milius added. "You should give Sinister more credit, Hadrian. The planet was just fine before we showed up—"

"—Slugs, worms, jellies, slimes and molds?" Hadrian scoffed. "Yes, yes, one of the universe's crown jewels, this place —No, no, Sinister is a paradise compared to what it was before."

"Maybe," Milius said. "But give it a few million years and these lesser life forms might've given us a run for it. Most of them are still here. Only a few of Sinister's pre-Planetfall creatures are extinct. And now we have…"

"—'A hybrid biome'—"

"—Right. Sinister may outlast all of our plans to domesticate it. The slugs and worms may be here long after we're gone."

"Doubtful."

Milus shook his head.

Humanity's hold on Sinister was tenuous. Despite the planet's size, humans had only settled its twilight regions. Kilometers

thick ice and darkness opposite a vast blinding desert of perpetual sunlight, civilization existed on a razor's edge. It wouldn't take much to upend it. Hadrian believed in humanity's primacy, a hubris rooted in the ability of L'Estelo Magnus pilots to navigate a starship into the unknown and settle a hostile world. Even now, Dru had to admit, the feat was astounding. Hadrian idolized the Planetfall architects whose disciplines were rooted in Bayesian inference, probability theory, and computational biology. But Hadrian was rewriting history. The journey of L'Estelo Magnus wasn't about hegemony, it was about religion.

They walked along the lake in the direction of The Nexus. Coconut husks littered the ground. Near the shore, fruit bushes siphoned lake water through stringy roots. Dru picked and tried one of the orange berries. The taste was sour and sweet but not bitter. They stopped so Dru could hack apart a coconut. Hadrian and Roman wandered off while Milius stayed behind and helped Dru extract the meat.

"They're getting awfully close to that line of swamp grass," Milius whispered. "Are you worried?"

"I'm sure there's no drosera here. I did a thorough survey up top. I would have seen something; they don't camouflage. We won't make the same mistake again." Dru pried a nut apart to

expose its white interior. “Also, the water’s not stagnant. It flows, so… too much vibration, too much ambient noise.”

“True.”

Dru nodded. “There’s a bog mantis down the shore a bit, do you see it?”

“Yes.”

“It wouldn’t be laying its eggs so close to the reeds if there was any threat.”

Dru broke off chunks of the coconut and handed it out. Its texture was different from those cultivated back home, more woody and oily. But edible enough, it was hard to complain. They sipped the milk from a broken shell. Dru tucked what was left into her rucksack. The others did the same except Roman, who finished his as he studied the map of Sinister’s sunward pole. He traced out the polar topography, features allegedly gathered by an undated Tigan balloon observation.

“The rift might be on this map,” he said, pushing his dirty finger into the canvas.

They crowded in. Hadrian pulled out his reading glasses. To Dru, it all looked like scribbles. Nothing was too scale, the features too whimsical to represent reality. It was a map from a child’s book, fantastical and out of proportion. She was surprised that the Novum Pax’s science institutes published such

questionable Tigan cartography.

"'Here be dragons'," Dru said, standing up and heaving her rucksack onto her back. We're off the map."

"This is all Rorschach, pattern seeking nonsense," Hadrian added. "Lucky guess maybe. Nothing more."

"'Here be dragons'? What are you talking about?" Roman said, annoyed.

"Ancient Latin, pre-Crossing. Hard to explain now," Dre replied. "A medieval homeworld phrase used when everything was less civilized, it meant 'dangerous' and 'unexplored.' They used it to entice the bold and the foolhardy to fill in the gaps. It did the trick, didn't it? Look at us," Dru said. "Now, let's go."

They followed the rift's wall as it curved away from the lake and into a dry finger canyon. The floodplain was flat and wide. The vegetation fell away, leaving only low-lying scrub. A few yucca trees held firm, their spiny arms reaching out in contortions. Shimmer flies perched on the higher limbs, licking brown sap with their coiled proboscis. Their multifaceted eyes reflected the sun like glitter.

"I see something," Dru said, pulling out her binoculars.

Dru noticed long rectangular shapes protruding from the valley cliff, artificial and constant in color. Closer in, the

structure revealed itself, a cliff dwelling of exquisite sophistication. The pioneers had made a go of it here. Despite Dru’s skepticism, her hunch had been right; the rift’s exquisite garden was intentional.

“A lost tribe.”

CHAPTER SIXTEEN: THE SLEEPERS

The structures were terraced. Built with an indigenous concrete and ship metal, the geometries defied gravity. Vast windows —the glass long gone— faced the valley and lake. From the ground, the buildings appeared to extend deep into the rift’s granite walls. Dru zoomed in with her binoculars but saw no stairs or ladders. However, on the valley floor a large recessed door sat back from a weedy slab. Its plate steel looked impregnable, but adjacent was a man-sized portal. The entry stood open, the portal’s door wrenched from its hinges. It looked to be their only means of ingress. With their lack of equipment, scaling the rock wall was too dangerous.

“Not at all primitive,” Milius remarked. “They knew what they were doing.”

“There’s agricultural plots near the slab. Look,” Hadrian said, passing the binoculars back to Dru. “A ditch connects them, and another leads down to the lake.” He traced a line in the air with his finger. “This must have been a nursery.” Dru tried to follow Hadrian but couldn’t. She only noticed the rubble of low-lying walls criss-crossing the flats surrounding them. Whatever outbuildings and pumping stations that once stood were gone. The area was free of debris, as if neatly packed up.

“Did Urbo rescue them?” Dru wondered.

“You would have to pour through the archives, but I doubt it,” Milius said. “Regardless, the buildings are in remarkably good shape. I can still see furniture and equipment on the lower level.”

“With lower salinity, this valley’s optimal, not like the desert above. This is no survivalist hovel. —No—No— These people were in it for the long haul,” Hadrian said, squinting at the structures. “Shall we go in?”

“Roman. Get the lamp ready,” Dru ordered.

“I just need an hour to charge it.”

The radioman unfolded the petals of the solar charger and hooked it to the salt battery. While they waited, Dru picked more berries and collected them in her hat, then passed it around. She warned them not to eat too many, but caution went

unheeded. If the expedition were to end in a bout of diarrhea, so be it.

They rested under a cloud of spheres. Hadrian pulled out a string and tied an end to his thermometer, then dangled it like a plumbob. He looked up and made mention of the zenith, then wandered out. Dru watched him walk tight circles around the dangling weight. She was curious, but not enough to shout after him. Milius gazed at the buildings transfixed.

“What do you see?”

He shook his head. “It looks infested.”

“You sure?”

“There’s a hive inside. I see movement around that smaller door. The insects have huge heads but thin bodies.”

Dru pulled out her binoculars and looked. Tigermites, big but innocuous. They weren’t dangerous, at least not in Vespera. However, these were different. They’d stripes on their abdomens, but their color was off. Instead of reds and yellows, they were gray and black.

“Are they carnivorous? What do they eat?” Milius asked.

Dru shrugged. “Cellulose mostly. Maybe worms. Not really sure, to be honest. Regardless, if they’ve a hive and a queen, all bets are off,” she said, counting the remaining rounds in her pistol. “We’ll have to be careful.”

“Maybe we shouldn’t go in?”

Hadrian shouted. He was signaling. Roman had joined him, having gotten bored waiting for the batteries to charge. The two were crowded around Roman’s map, pointing at it with exuberance. Dru and Milius wandered over.

“We’re near the zenith, maybe less than a hundred kilometers. The plumbob doesn’t have the greatest precision, but it’s less hazy now for whatever reason. Those old theories look true: the Nexus, the geographic sunward pole, both co-aligned…” Hadrian carried on.

Hadrian referred to the idea that a solar outburst —a gravitational ‘shock’— had created The Rip. And like a pebble dropped into a bucket of water, the space-time turbulence had emanated away from The Nexus —that point nearest the sun— like the pulse from an asteroid impact.

“It’s like they thought,” Roman said, looking at his map and the gauntlet’s indicator. “The Rip isn’t random. It’s causal.”

“If the canyons continue further in, and we follow them, we should reach the Nexus in a few wakes, three or four at most,” Hadrian explained.

“No more desert.” Roman smiled, relieved.

“Is the lamp charged?” Dru asked Roman, changing the subject. “Let’s go investigate.”

“It’s been hours since we slept, Dru,” Roman protested. “Shouldn’t we try to make camp?”

“Out here?” Dru scoffed. “There’s no protection and we don’t know what’s lurking. Creatures here seem innocuous, but we don’t know. We need better shelter.”

“But we can keep watch,” Hadrian suggested. “I’d like to try to hone my measurements.”

Dru shook her head. “No.”

“As you wish. Let’s get moving then,” Hadrian said after a pause, his tone curt.

Dru lacked Hadrian and Roman’s enthusiasm. Milius, like her, was also ambivalent. The scientist wound up his makeshift instrument and packed it up with a forced smile. At the edge of the cement slab, they got a better look at the outpost. The construction was industrial, defying the pioneer’s perceived means. Rock drills, dynamite, steel reinforcements, hydraulic movers, and a prefabricated utility system, all must have been brought to bear. Whatever hardware provisioned on L’Estelo Magnus was superbly engineered. The build would have taken years, maybe decades.

The portal’s door leaned against a nearby rock pile. It was fabricated from a composite of alloys, carbon fiber, and glass weave. From the scratches and gnaw marks, the valley’s fauna had

done their worst. Roman turned on the lamp and adjusted its brightness, then panned the darkness beyond the doorway. He wore the gauntlet on his other hand, making Dru nervous. She'd warned him to be careful with the weapon trigger. Despite his reassurances, his adolescent theatrics were disconcerting.

"Leave the rucksacks," Dru ordered. "They'll snag."

"Out here? But the animals will get to them."

"We won't be long."

As Roman stepped inside, a swarm of tigermites scurried out, their feelers and mandibles agitated. Roman leapt back and fell against a barbed cactus. The insects knocked into Hardian's legs and sent him to the ground. The creatures dashed across the slab, ignoring them, programmed for other business. When Hadrian and Roman had got back to their feet, the animals had disappeared into the network of dry ditches, their chitters fading in the listless air.

"Is everyone okay?" Dru shouted.

Hadrian dusted himself off and nodded.

"More or less," Roman said, pulling a few needles from his jumpsuit as he extracted himself from the cactus.

"Is this really a good idea?" Milius said, gesturing at the doorway.

"We ditched the belay gear back at the hulk. It's too

dangerous to climb up to the terrace. There must be a way up from the inside," Dru said, again fingering her holstered pistol.

Roman hesitated. His bravado was all but gone. Dru noticed his trepidation and grabbed the lamp from him, then entered the darkness. The space opened up. She stopped and waited for her eyes to dilate. The large steel door adjacent hid a garage and storage bay. Dust was thick. Creatures had ransacked everything not made of metal. Despite the damage, a set of vehicles remained, a cycle and a monotrack, spared from the salt flats' corrosion. Dru was taken aback by the thought that the machines had rolled off an assembly line light years away. And now, here they were, abandoned in this alien place thousands of years later.

The others entered behind her and complained about the stuffy heat. With her nerves on edge, Dru hadn't noticed. But now, the air smothered her. Her underclothes felt tight from sweat. Like the overheated compartments of the pioneer ship, the squishy air was suffocating.

"By the priests of Capricorn, this heat…"

"And the smell…"

A waft of vinegar and ammonia stung Dru's nose as she listened to clicks and skitters of unseen animals. She saw something dash

through the lamp’s mote-filled cone. The tigermites were busy. But doing what, Dru wasn’t sure. A passage continued on into the cliff, its floor littered with detritus. A fuzzy layer of lichen coated the walls. The four stepped over and around jumbled heaps as they headed for the tunnel. A few tigermites loitered at the entrance, tending to the refuse and plant matter. Despite Hadrian’s wide breadth of scientific knowledge, he said little about the insects.

A few meters on, a shaft opened up to their left. Recessed into the granite wall, a corroded panel indicated this was an elevator. The lift, however, was no more, just the shaft’s frame remained. Dru shined the lamp around and saw nothing but a tangle of rusted metal in the pit below. Light spilled in from the landings above. With no companionway, she’d happened upon the only way up; they’d have to climb it.

“Shall we?” Milius said, gesturing. “With the I-beams and bolt attaches, we can find handholds.”

“I want to see where this goes,” Dru said, panning the lamp down the tunnel, the speckled glow of multifaceted eyes staring back.

“I don’t,” Hadrian said, his face gaunt in the dim light. “I can’t see anything worthwhile being down there. It’s probably a sewer.”

“Not compelled by science, Hadrian?”

The scientist shook his head.

“I’ll stay back with him,” Milius offered. “You and Roman go search it out.”

“But I need to take the lamp.”

“With the light from the shaft…” Milius paused to look up. “We’ll be okay.”

Dru led the way and pressed on. Like a mother, she scolded Roman to stop pointing the gauntlet at her back. She should’ve taken it from him. The stranger’s gear was burnt circuitry, a melange of organic and electro-mechanical malfunction. The gauntlet’s battery was doubtlessly unstable. And Dru worried the whole thing would explode in a white sizzle. But she’d no energy for expedition protocol and hierarchical discipline.

Dancing around the tigermites, Roman urged Dru to stop and turn off the lamp. She clicked the toggle and stood still. The lichen glowed as it had in the hulk. The patchy bioluminescence rendered the walls in yellow and green psychedelia. A few meters further, the lichen glowed even brighter.

“What’s causing this?” Roman whispered.

“Hadrian would know, but I’m not going back for him. He looked afraid.”

With the lamp off, the radiance grew more intense, enough to

cast faint shadows. Further on, the tunnel emptied into a domed chamber. The lichen coated everything. Above a central well, it glowed even brighter, with the well itself emanating a faint blue radiance. Against the far wall sat a bank of moldering machinery, its conduits and pipes snaking towards the well and then down into its depths. Adjacent to the machines was a row of ten hibernation pods, modified variants of those aboard L'Estelo Magnus. The canopies were opaque with age. A few were cracked open like eggshells.

Muffled chittering filled the space, unsettling Dru. The insects came and went from the blue well. Drones entered the pit, mandibles full of mulch, while others poured out to seek more.

"There's a reactor down there," Roman said, pointing a fat gauntlet-finger at the well. "The radiation causes the lichen to glow."

"We should get out of here," Dru said, backing away. "Radiation poisoning is the last thing we need."

"The tigermites seem okay. Low level emissions, most likely. The hive must be somewhere in the pit, nested in the heat exchanger's cooling channels."

"Maybe they've adapted to it."

Despite Dru's pleading, Roman crept to the edge and looked

down. Tigermites emerged and butted into his legs but did not attack. The indigo lit his face with a ghostly pallor, his expression a mix of awe and confusion.

“There’s water. Larva and egg clusters, drones coming and going from drain tubes and dry circulation ducts. This well is just the entrance.”

“The blue light, what’s causing it?” Dru asked.

“The reactor core, under the water. Still fissioning. But the water’s too murky to see anything.”

“Step away. You’re making me nervous.”

Roman backed up and stumbled. Dru shined her light and noticed he’d tripped over a carcass, a lizard. As she panned about, she noticed other remains scattered near the hibernation pods. She pondered why the pioneers had bothered to recreate interstellar hibernation in such a place. But the answer was obvious; this place —this chamber— was a time capsule, and it had failed. The outpost was impressive, but it was only a lifeboat. The pioneers, unable to escape this remote polar region, decided to wait it out, sleep, and hope for rescue. But no one arrived.

“They’d radios, navigation, even vehicles, yet they couldn’t evacuate,” Dru whispered. “So they waited.”

“Why didn’t anyone come? They knew about them —they had to.”

Salis Majora was a formidable wasteland, its geography

inhospitable. To risk rescue must've been untenable for a nascent Urbo and its early colonies. Countervailing wind patterns limited the range of balloon travel. The vast fluvial latitudes made vehicle travel impossible. The polar air was too thin for airplanes and the fuel required was too heavy. Sinister's sunward side was only explorable by boat and then by foot. Without the shelter of The Rip, sun exposure would've been lethal. A few shortwave pings for help wouldn't have been enough to risk a polar excursion. Even after The Rip's cataclysm, Novum Pax's administrators endlessly debated whether to fund Vespera's Nexus expedition.

They were the de-facto rescuers, but they were centuries late. Dru approached a pod and shined her lamp into its broken canopy. The remains had been disturbed, the paper-thin skin and desiccated hair a formless pile. Shredded clothes loosely held bones together. The rifts' creatures had gotten to it. Thoughts of the unconscious eaten alive soured her stomach. She felt dizzy.

"What do you see?" Roman whispered.

"Something ate them —or some of them— while they slept. Parts of this mummy are missing."

"Ate them alive?"

Dru shrugged. "The hibernation system might have mercifully

failed first. I don’t know.”

Roman crept over to have a look. His eyes wide and mouth agape. Something had smashed the pods and clawed their way in — maybe one of the lake lizards. She closed her eyes and tried to quell the thoughts. The pods had no power, long shutdown from failure. A sheen of filth formed a chrysalis around them. Roman tried to assure her the pods had suffered a reactor malfunction not long after hibernation began. He was probably right —as Dru desperately wanted to believe— but the possibility of being eaten in stasis remained.

“Why didn’t they assign custodians, like they did aboard L’Estelo Magnus?” Roman wondered.

“Living alone in this valley, tending to your cocooned companions for decades… you’d go mad.”

“Maybe not,” Roman argued. “The rift couldn’t sustain a colony, but a few could easily survive.”

“You’d be wasting time. And maybe there was a custodian —or two— and they died. Something might’ve killed them, an accident, a predator, the elements… themselves. They probably thought they were safe here, sealed up in this vault.”

Roman pursed his lips and nodded. Dru bashed the latch of an intact pod with her pistol. The mechanism crumbled and fell to the ground. She threw off the canopy and stood back. Roman took

the lamp from her and shined it inside. Dru inched closer. Roman shook his head in requiem. The mummy was small, the hair braided in a specific manner. Next to the child was a doll made of plastic. Laying on the girl's chest was a necklace with a golden locket. Trembling, Dru gently undid its gold clasp. Inside were names in Old Esperanto underneath small photos, one of her parents, and another that looked to be a sibling, maybe a sister. She slid the chain into her pocket, grabbed the lamp from Roman, and backed away.

"Seven or eight years old," Dru said. "She was born in this place. This was her home."

"She might have been a passenger," Rowan speculated.

"Children weren't awakened with the custodial crews. No such protocols existed. It wouldn't have been pragmatic; it drained life support. And to build this place… They were in the rift for a long time," Dru reasoned.

She imagined desperate parents making the decision to put their child to sleep with only a faint hope of waking. Her eyes welled. She choked down a sob that burst into a laugh. The idea of the four of them —ragtags of a failing expedition— greeting the sleepers after centuries… It was absurd. She looked back at the train of tigermites and scattered reptile remains. Other detritus —moltings and web-like clumps— indicated epochs of

creature infestation.

“Crack the rest. Open the other pods up,” Dru ordered the radioman.

“Why?”

“I think she had a sibling, a sister maybe. I want to find her,” Dru said, a murky rage welling in her throat.

“Sure, Dru. If you say so,” Roman said, his face pinched with concern.

They bashed and cracked open the remaining hibernation pods. Desiccated bodies mixed with dust, clothing shreds, and the frayed ends of monitor wires and brittle saline tubes filled each, but the skeletons were all adults. Roman suggested the child’s sibling may’ve been older, but the picture in the locket told otherwise.

“She’s not here Roman,” Dru seethed, wiping a tear from her eye.

They both looked at the two destroyed pods, unsaid thoughts aligning to the same conclusion. Roman calmly waved his arms, noticing Dru’s eyes were wet and red with emotion.

“Maybe her sister died before it came to this? We don’t know,” Roman pleaded.

Dru shook her head. The truth was obvious. The creatures, if not the tigermites, then maybe the lizards —or whatever was

lurking in the rifts canyons or walls before– had desecrated this unintentional crypt. A grave robbery, the child's sister had been converted to protein, her body disappearing into the valley's unique ecology.

"Move Roman," Dru ordered the radioman, standing in between her and the well beyond.

"These children weren't alone, Dru. They were with their parents. It's not like you think. They weren't abandoned. It's nobody's fault," Roman implored.

She wiped her eyes, secured the lamp to a belt strap, and pulled her pistol from its holster. Loading a round into the chamber, she stepped around Roman and marched up to the well.

"Dru. Please stop."

She looked into the cerulean and saw jittering legs of countless insects interspersed between bulging eggs and writhing larva. She could hear their squelchy noises. Why had these insects –presumably spilled from the same starship– thrived while the pioneers had died? The fauna from the hulk's payload filled an allowable niche, she supposed. And despite the injustice of time, the truth was the insects, reptiles, arachnids –whatever– would have always breached the vault.

"Don't! You'll stir up the soldiers!"

Dru emptied the pistol’s magazine, firing wildly down into the reactor pit. When the trigger clicked dry, she threw it at a nearby tigermite. The weight caved its oblong head, releasing a spray of yellow fluid. As more insects climbed from the pit, they tore the dying creature apart. The horde balled up and consumed the carcass in seconds. With nothing left, the swarm attacked themselves. Soon, the tigermites flowed in her direction. Dru stood her ground. She heard Roman shout, then felt the pinch of mandibles lock onto her boot. The pain was sharp. Mouthparts snatched her pant leg. She screamed as Roman grabbed her by her jumpsuit’s collar and flung her towards the tunnel.

“Run Drusilla!”

She fell to the ground, picked herself up, then sprinted up the passageway. She soon realized Roman hadn’t caught up. With her lamp off, she waited for him in the lichen’s glow until a crackling blast blinded her. An amoeba dazzle persisted as she batted her eyelids. The back of her eyes throbbed. From nowhere, Roman slammed into her, knocking her down.

“Why did you do that, Dru?”

Dru said nothing.

“I’m going to give them another blast. Put your sun goggles on,” he shouted.

Dru fumbled with the straps. Roman tried to help but she batted him away. With her goggles now on, she saw nothing but black. Seconds felt like minutes waiting for Roman to fire the gauntlet. A click conjured a ball of lightning. The crackly dynamo hovered and then shot down the tunnel with precision. Roman had mastered the malfunctioning weapon, bobbling its chaos with confidence. The blast pumped the air with a hollow thump. Shadows of the insects washed away in a plasma explosion.

“There’s too many. We need to keep going,” Roman said as he shoved Dru onward.

Dru pulled off her goggles. They hurried back to the elevator shaft, careful to avoid the drones heading in the opposite direction. With the lichen’s fading bioluminescence, Dru unslung the lamp and flicked it on. A brief glimmer then darkness, the battery’s connection had failed. Again, Roman tripped into her and they both fell into fungal loam. Spiny legs poked her, the carapace of a wandering tigermite brushing past. She screamed and crawled away. Roman fired the gauntlet again. The shot fizzled. The weapon had lost charge. Dru pinched her eyes shut until the light dissipated. Crawling, she felt her way forward.

“Drusilla!” someone yelled. “Up here!”

They were back at the elevator shaft, her vision still blurry. She tapped the lamp just enough to spark a flicker, then it died

for good. Hadrian and Milius stood at the landing, pointing.

“Grab onto the rail by the counterweight track. You can climb up from there,” Milius shouted.

Roman managed another blast, the crackling sputter of the plasma barely able to form. Dru’s voice wavered as she ordered Roman to climb. The tigermites rushed up behind her like a wind. Carefully, she swung into the shaft and started to scale the creaking metal. Hadrian shouted as the insects toppled into the pit below her.

Near the landing’s edge, Roman reached down and grabbed onto her cuffs. The gauntlet's three bulky fingers gripped her clothes with a superhuman strength. The tigermites below writhed in a coherent mass. A soldier tried to scale a rail but fell back and disappeared into the churning throng. The swarm remained trapped. The walls were too steep. A few exited back into the tunnel using their brethren as a ladder, but most clambered about in a frenzy. Roman and Dru heaved themselves up onto the ledge with the help of Hadrian and Milius.

“What do we do? We can’t go back down.”

“They’ll move on eventually. They’re done with us for now,” Dru said, standing up and backing away.

Her heart slowed. Nobody said anything until Hadrian mumbled something about how he knew splitting up was a bad idea. Dru

ignored him and looked around, taking in the station's interiors. The room took up the entire floor. Absent were partitions. Only a few columns broke up the space. A wall of windows once stood facing the lake, but now only their frames remained. Ten meters above the valley floor, the view offered an uninterrupted panorama of distant palms and the glittering lake. They spoke aloud, mostly to themselves, about what purpose the space had once served. Hadrian offered his opinions of course, identifying it as a terraforming lab. Ruined, but still identifiable, were large acrylic vats, incubators, vivariums, hydroponic rigs and an assortment of pumps, filters, and power systems used to cultivate new ecosystems. All of it had been recovered from the pioneer ships and hulks, moved piece by piece using the rover, and installed.

Dru told Milius and Hadrian about the chamber, specifically the details regarding the nuclear reactor and the ten hibernation pods. Hadrian guessed the reactor once powered the installation. He seemed astonished that the colony only sustained ten inhabitants.

"That's too few for all of <u>this</u>."

"Attrition. The hibernation pods were a last resort, generations winnowed down to a handful of survivors," Dru guessed. "A slow decline."

Milius wandered off behind a row of teetering equipment racks, shouting that he'd found a way up. A spiral staircase coiled around one of the pillars. Light was plentiful, a fortunate turn as Dru had lost their only lamp. Any further forays into claustrophobic darkness would be impossible now. Roman claimed the gauntlet was recharging. How? When Dru asked, he replied he 'just knew.' With all of Dru's firearms spent, Roman was 'on point'.

A roar of wings greeted them on the next floor. The low hum hurt Dru's ears, exasperating her tinnitus. The space, similar in size and layout to the floor below, was filled with hovering grasshoppers. They'd startled the creatures; this was their roost. Then, as if one mind, the striped insects swarmed and flew out the open windows, disappearing into the rift.

"Locusts," Hadrian said.

"What are locusts?" Milius asked, watching the swarm shrink and expand at the far end of the valley near the canyon outlet.

"Locusts are a version of the common cricket –a horned acrididae cryptid– a homeworld artifact and very rare on Sinister. Tajigo and Vespera worked to suppress their evolutionary predispositions as a 'pest' species, but alas…" Hadrian explained.

The scientist pondered events that might've led to the polar

colony’s eventual demise. Their ecological experiment was unstable in the end. Random bits of genetics, mixed with environmental noise, shifted the manifold of equations, spawning a locust plague. But the pioneers must have known this beforehand. They were smart and paid attention to detail. Neural models and Bayesian engines must have predicted their long slow decline. But with a calculated timeline, they’d been able to plan contingencies, one of which being a ‘hibernation escape’.

“The rift seems in balance now,” Roman said. “Flourishing, even.”

“But without its human denizens,” Hadrian winked. “It’s reached a different equilibrium.”

The floor was a living space that included a commissary, lounge furniture, and bunk beds partitioned in orderly rows along the back wall. Like the hibernation vault and labs below, the rift’s animals had ransacked it, leaving only that which an insect or an arachnid couldn’t possibly make use of. Dru walked up to the wall of windows —glass shards still stuck in the frame— pulled up a chair, and sat down. Hunched in exhaustion, she knew they needed to make camp. On the slab below, she saw their rucksacks. A few tigermites sniffed at them as they came and went.

“Our gear…” she sighed.

“This place is stripped. We’ll have to scrounge to make a rope to get down,” Roman said. “There’s another stairwell leading up to the next level. Maybe we can find something there.”

Above was the operations center, the floorplan smaller than the floors below. The area provided commanding views of the rift. An array of telescopes on robotic mounts sat anchored and aligned along an adjacent exterior platform. Beyond was a ledge carved from the rock that led to a ladder bolted to the cliff face. Most of the equipment looked like hardware from the pioneer ship, but some of it was completely foreign. Higher up, the area offered protection, and as such, a reasonable place to make camp. Roman volunteered to retrieve their rucksacks and canteens, salvaging wire and synthetic weave straps to hoist their gear up through the elevator shaft. He ventured back into the darkness with an intrepid enthusiasm. After climbing back up, he reported the tigermites had dispersed, the others carrying on as if nothing happened.

The station had little salvage. Exhausted, they planned to recuperate here before the last leg to the Nexus, a welcome limbo. Used to the Salis Majora’s static wasteland, Dru was unnerved by the valley’s constant change. But as the hours passed, she grew enamored with the landscape. With a rich ecology and an abundance of wildlife —relatively speaking— her

tensions waned. The shifting lake water –oscillating back and forth from waterfall to whirlpools– kept an hourly schedule. The pull of Sinister’s moons were at its maximum here, the vast aquifers in their thrall. The rift’s tides evoked notions of the homerworld, however faint the echo.

Hadrian went about as he had, investigating the site and reporting his archeological findings. She kept up her curiosity but feigned interest after a while. Milius had found a route down to the valley floor via a hidden ladder network adjacent to the exterior platform. As such, Dru followed Milius out on routine forays into the rift. He’d a knack for foraging and hunting. Dru helped him gather crustaceans, coconuts, fruits and berries along the shore. Milius even identified a few wild grains still irrigated by lake flooding. Milling it with flat rocks created a coarse flour that made a green pasty starch. They spent most of their time preparing the main meal, and soon Dru could think of nothing else.

Soft-shelled crab, stewed in coconut milk, mixed with wild herbs and salt from valley rim, then simmered in a makeshift pot was a mainstay. They roasted a lone honey-beetle, offering a feast that left them stuffed. Dru even discovered patches of hardscrabble citrus clinging to the cliff faces. When squeezed into a juice, its sweetness overcame the fruit's bitterness.

Wakes turned into a week and Dru forgot about The Rip. The clustered spheres were like permanent clouds, distant as if to be an abstraction.

Finally brave enough, Dru awoke early one wake while the others slept. She snuck off to the cave of the sleepers where she carefully removed the remains of the girl from her hibernation pod. The tigermites were fewer, more docile, and easily negotiated. Carefully wrapped in a makeshift tote, she folded up and carried the desiccated body to a clearing just below the colony complex. She dug a shallow grave into the caliche and laid the mummy out, setting the child's doll next to her. Collecting pieces of shale, Dru stacked an ovum shaped cairn about the grave to mark it. She supposed she could have scavenged the complex for something more suitable, more permanent. She didn't know her name, but she gave her one none-the-less.

"I'm sorry," Dru whispered.

Kneeling, she looked for a place to rest the child's gold locket on the cairn. But she held it tight instead. Fist clenched around its chain, a wave of sobs escaped her. Attempts to regain her composure failed. She hadn't cried as much since she was a girl. A warm melancholy filled her. Relief. A heat within mutated into a hot burn that filled her eyes and her

chest. Exhausted from anxiety, a momentary vulnerability cleansed her. She felt defenseless, but let it go, and felt the warm hug of a natural benzodiazepine.

Eventually, the fit ran its course. Wiping the sting from her eyes with her cuff, she undid the clasps and put the necklace on. When she returned, Roman was up. With a glance, he knew what she'd been up to, but he mentioned nothing to the others.

"Are you okay?" he asked.

"Yeah," Dru replied. "I'm okay."

As the wakes wore on, Roman grew impatient, but was alone in his restiveness. He brought up The Nexus often but was ignored in favor of trivial conversation. Topics about animal movements, or newly discovered plants, muted expedition talk. Roman, almost in disbelief, grew frustrated. The Rip represented something else to him, and he was restless to know its secrets.

But Dru, along with the other two, knew exactly what they were doing; it needn't be discussed. After months of single-mindedness, the respite was a welcome change. Having been at the mercy of the Salis Majora for weeks, if not a month or more, the feeling of living —even thriving— bewitched them. Dru knew the valley would eventually fail them, like it had the pioneers. But for now, such a thought seemed distant. In the moment, they were alive and thoughts of survival felt far removed. Quiet routines

emerged amidst their provisional reality. Like the lake’s ebb and flow, a predictability took hold.

Then after a particularly restful sleep, Dru awoke to find the spell had broken.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN: THE STRANGER

The waterfall muted the buzz and chirps of the valley's insects. The low hiss masked her tinnitus and helped Dru sleep – and it kept her asleep– but it'd stopped, and now she was awake. The ringing in her ears roared. She rolled onto her side and lay still. While the floor was metal grate, she felt its comfortable coolness flow up through her sleeping mat. She opened her eyes and looked at a bank of monitors silhouetted by the rift beyond. Still groggy, she took stock of the jumbled hardware that filled the operations center. Some of it was obvious –computer racks, safety gear, climate units– but the rest defied explanation. Near the entryway, leading to the terrace, a tall paneled cylinder sat adjacent to an intake duct. Like a piece of machinery from L'Estelo Magnus, the object was impervious to

corrosion. Either galvanized, or constructed from a palladium alloy, it'd been designed not to deteriorate. But such components were rare, smaller, and typically attached to things like life-support systems, couplers, hatch hinges —things that needed to be reliable at Planetfall. The bulky cylinder, however, made little sense; its purpose was unclear. And as such, it caught Dru's attention.

"Who goes there?"

It moved; its sides expanded in a mechanical transformation. The nascent stirring must have awoken her. Ten long articulated legs sprouted up then down, the center-body reconfiguring into a faceted thorax. The spider stood for a moment and exercised its parts like a hatchling. A stalk of sensors blossomed from its head. Its proboscis unfurled then retracted like a yawn. While in the midst of the idle robot, they'd been oblivious to its presence. Unlike its ruined counterparts, this unit was in perfect working order. Her weapons spent and driven by instinct, Dru reached for her knife. But the spider's composites were like armor, and bladed weapons would do little.

Careful not to move, Dru looked to see if the others were nearby. But she was alone. They'd fallen back into staggered schedules, a holdover from their watches in the desert. Wandering the rift, they were likely kilometers away. Dru waited

tense minutes for the robot to do something, wander outside maybe, crawl up the cliff, and disappear. But no luck. Instead, the spider stood prone with legs swaying, then lumbered about. Dru jumped to her feet as it turned. Seemingly confused, it walked about randomly, as if calibrating its guidance sensors. Deep blue lights strobed in patterns as its various internal systems came online. Dru squinted into the sunlight and saw Roman standing at the ladder near the platform's edge. He'd the gauntlet trained on the robot. Flexing its three fingers, he was ready to clench and fire.

Dru waved for him to stop, but Roman didn't notice her in the shadows. His movements had triggered its sensors. It ambled towards him. Shouts to stop were in vain; it was too late. The gauntlet's weapon crackled to life, more chaotic and uncontrolled than before. The radioman bobbled the sputtering lightning, then cast it at the spider. It exploded in an orchestra of sparks and fizzles that spread like a web over its chassis. Dru shut her eyes then opened them. The spider stood as it had before, unphased.

Roman tried to fire again but was stopped. A focused plasma struck the radioman and knocked him to the platform grate. But it hadn't come from the spider, it had come from somewhere behind Druscilla. Incredulous, she spun around and noticed a

stranger standing at the landing of the elevator shaft. His face was hidden behind his faceted helmet. And unlike the remains of his colleague, he looked healthy and free of disease. Agile, he'd used the elevator shaft to quietly climb his way through the complex. Roman screamed in pain. Worried she'd draw the stranger's fire, she helplessly watched the radioman writhe. With his arm flopping across his chest, legs kicking, he was wounded but alive.

Dru tried to hide, but the stranger noticed her and approached. He walked like no one she'd seen. Hunched with crooked posture, he high-stepped and swerved in a performative saunter almost like a dance. His head brushed into the ceiling's maze of dangling hoses and wiring. When he reached Dru, he lorded over her. Dru's eyes welled with fear.

The suit —an organism unto itself— whirred with the sound of pneumatic and hydraulic pumps. Like the dead stranger's kit, inside was a sophisticated system of electromechanical servos powering artificial muscles and joints. Dru wanted to look away, close her eyes and wish it gone, but it wasn't to be. Standing before her, the alien's presence demanded attention. Dru scanned the room hoping to see Hadrian or Milius but saw no one. Eyes blurred with tears, she pointed her knife at the stranger, heart pounding.

The stranger stood unprovoked, making vocal noises as if to speak. The sound was a mechanical garble of jarring volume. Dru clasped her ears. He repeated himself. Dru shook her head in confusion. Tapping a button on his gauntlet, the moth-eyed helmet retracted, revealing most of his head except his mouth. His face was unblemished and disease free, eyes mirrored with a glint of rainbow like an oil slick. So opaque and dark, Dru saw her reflection in their pupil-less voids. The stranger was nearly bald save a black stubble. Just within the hairline was the telltale pattern of bolts, the same as Ludoviko. Around his mouth was a manifold of tubes that might have been a radio, a breathing apparatus, or a water dispenser.

The stranger barked again, but the sharpness was muted. His lips were moving; he was talking. He repeated himself several more times. The language was foreign but not completely unfamiliar. Dru was transfixed. His incomprehensible babble had a familiar tone.

“Kiu vi estas?”

“My name is Druscilla,” Dru replied, her mouth dry and voice cracked.

“Kie mi estas? Kio estas ci tiu loco?”

“The Salis Majora. Sinister’s sunward pole.”

“Sin-ess-steer?” the stranger repeated slowly.

Dru nodded.

“Kiu estas tiu? Li havas ion,” the stranger said, pointing his odd three-fingered glove in the direction of the loitering spider and Roman.

“His name is Roman. I need to tend to him.”

“Cu estas aliaj?”

“Hadrian and Milius. They’re not armed,” Dru replied.

“Kie ili estas?”

“I don’t know.”

The stranger walked onto the terrace to reunite with the spider. The robot was his agent, and he interacted with it like a trained animal. The two approached Roman as he tried to scoot away, clutching his mangled arm. A few meters from the platform’s edge, Roman had little option for escape. He tried to lift the gauntlet, but his arm failed. The stranger had a proficiency and command over the fully functioning weapons system that eluded Roman. The radioman gave up as the stranger kneeled next to him and yanked the gauntlet free.

He stood and inspected it, his eyes pinched and forehead wrinkled. He gazed at The Rip then said something. Roman shook his head, not understanding. Dru ran out to join Roman, stepping past the stranger and his spider companion. She could feel the robot’s sensor array and the stranger’s soulless eyes follow

her. The spider shifted its weight, pneumatics hissing, but the machine and its handler did nothing.

“Die kie li akiris ci tion?”

“We recovered the weapon from one of yours. He was dead. Out in the salt desert,” she said, turning and pointing to the valley’s rim. “He died from a rotting disease.”

She’d replied in High Esperanto without thinking. The stranger spoke a barely recognizable dialect, but Dru understood him. His Esperanto was that of thespians, opera, and classic literature – the Eserpanto of Planetfall– not that of modern Tajigo. His lips were un-synced to his mouth device. A microphone translated his odd mumbles, and piped it through tinny speakers. He’d his own native tongue –a ‘shushing’– spoken with a clench-jawed and few consonants. The strangers weren’t really aliens at all, but human, however tangential. They were cognizant of Sinister a priori; they knew the language, and as such, their presence here was no accident.

“Where did you find Li?” the stranger asked, the synthesized Esperanto broken and staticy.

“Maybe fifty kilometers shadoward,” she said, pointing in the general direction.

Her answer didn’t seem to make sense to him. He said something about the gauntlet misfiring, that it wasn’t ‘right’, and how no

one should have been using it. To hammer home his point, he tossed it over the platform's edge. As the gauntlet fell, he swung his arm in a feat of precision, aimed, and released a filament of purple-white electricity. The target exploded midair in a cloud of sizzling particles.

Dru kneeled next to Roman and investigated his arm. His jumpsuit had melted into his flesh, the wound a criss-cross of seeping pink filled with black soot. She used her knife to cut away the sleeve as he screamed. Little remained from her medical kit, but what was left, she needed. Both aliens —mechanical and humanoid— stood idly by —almost relaxed.

"I need to get him medicine," she announced, the stranger's eyes vacant. "It's in my rucksack, back inside," she said, pointing past them into the darkness of the operations center.

The stranger quietly stared at her. By his manner, he showed no fear, aloof and calm. Dirty, thin, sun-worn, and now unarmed, Dru and Roman were undeniably vulnerable. Knowing what she needed to do, she swallowed —her throat parched— and looked straight ahead as she walked past. Once inside, she pulled out her medkit and sorted its contents.

"Not much left, not much at all."

When she returned, the stranger stood at the edge of the platform near the ladder, looking down. She thought about

rushing and shoving him over –defenestrating the intruder– but doubted his spider servitor would idly stand by. And what would it achieve? Another corpse and no answers; they needed the stranger, oddly. Maybe the stranger knew that. Maybe he knew what Dru was going to do before she did it, some precognition enhanced by an artificial associative network. Desperate people –still of sound mind– were a predictable group, and Dru had no tricks up her sleeve.

"Are those the other two?" the stranger said in fuzzy tones of artificial Esperanto.

"Hadrian and Milius. They're older and unarmed," Dru said, pronouncing the words carefully to avoid ambiguity.

"Druscilla!" she heard Hadrian shout from below. "What's going on up there?"

"We have visitors. There's been an incident," Dru shouted back, tending to Roman's wound with the dregs of an anti-bacterial spray.

"Incident?"

"Climb up. But do it slowly. No sudden movements. I'm tending to Roman. He's been injured."

The stranger showed neither alarm nor concern. His face was devoid of expression.

"What do they call you? What's your name?" Dru asked, careful

to speak every syllable.

After a pause –or a translation processing delay– the stranger answered that his name was ‘Lo’, so quickly she thought it may’ve been a glitch. She spoke his name back to him and received a nod of acknowledgement.

“Lo, do you have any medical equipment with you? Bandages, pharmaceuticals, that sort of thing?”

He shook his head then turned his weapon on Hadrian and Milius as they clambered onto the platform. Startled and intimidated, they shuffled over to Dru, keeping their distance.

“How did this happen?” Milius asked, looking at the stranger, then at Roman in horror.

“The stranger –Lo is his name– shot him,” Dru replied, wrapping Roman’s arm with a thin roll of gauze to hold a bandage pad in place. “Roman fired on the robot –it’d been hiding in the operations area with us –I don’t know for how long. Lo snuck up on us and returned fire.”

“What about you?” Milius asked Dru.

“Since I’m weaponless, our friend here left me alone.”

Lo honed in on Milius’s left eye. He lumbered towards him and grabbed him by the neck. Milius fought his grasp, but the gauntlet’s augmented strength was no match. Like a curious barbarian, Lo tapped the black sphere with his giant forefinger.

The tap was more of a punch, throwing Milius's head back and making a 'thud' sound. Lo's lip curled in a mix of bemusement and revulsion.

"Lo!" Dru snapped at him. "You're hurting him."

"How did this happen?" Lo asked.

"How did what happen?" Dru replied angrily, holding a canteen of water to Roman's lips so he could drink.

"It's in his head," Lo remarked.

"Yes. Very much so," Dru replied, growing angry at the laconic stranger. "Let him go… please."

He dropped Milius, who crumpled to the platform grate. Dru shouted to see if he was okay. He didn't reply but gave a thumbs up, still reeling as he rubbed his throat. Roman's pain medication was kicking in, his eyes grew wide and spacey. Dru tried to mother him the best she could. Idly shifting his weight, Lo studied them as his spider sidled next to him. He kept his empty eyes on Milius. The anomalous Rip fragment lodged in the civil engineer's head defied some truth Lo'd been told; but what that was, Dru did not know.

"Druscilla, you're conversing in High Esperanto," Hadrian whispered. "How is that possible?"

"He's not really speaking it. It's a built-in translator that converts his native speech –something indecipherable– into an

old, hardly understandable dialect," Dru explained. "It's the Esperanto of L'Estelo Magnus, Planetfall, the old colonies."

"That doesn't make sense," Hadrian said.

"It makes perfect sense," Milius groaned. "It's an assumption based on homeworld records that the colonists who traveled here would have some capacity to converse in its original language. And their assumption was correct; these strangers know our history."

"You think that this stranger—" Hadrian began.

"—Lo," Dru interrupted. "He calls himself 'Lo'—"

"—This Lo," Hadrian continued," is from the homeworld?"

"No one's heard from the homeworld, ever," Milius said. "We built massive radio dishes and pointed them back home. We sent out a constant stream of signals but never received so much as a blip."

Dru knew the lore. The 'quiet homeworld theory' had been the vindication of Capricorn's long gone priesthood, apocalyptic end-of-days prophecies about the mother planet that'd come to pass. Revivalists in both Vespera and Tajigo —one of the few examples of Sinister unity— periodically refurbished the old dishes in ceremonies. Astronomers calculated the homeworld's location among the stars. Bursts of radio waves were cast to make the light years round trip. But Sinister's radios were

always filled with static.

While prophetic doom proved an appealing cause, a more pragmatic explanation for the homeworlder's silence emerged: the L'Estelo Magnus had simply been forgotten. In the vast interstellar void, if two distant radios failed to align their antennas within micro-radians, civilization's weak murmur would be swamped by cosmic noise. A thousand years into deep space and a few dropped transmissions would sever the link, relegating the location of L'Estelo Magnus a mystery. Complicated by a slight trajectory shift –uncommunicated to receivers back home– and the link would fail forever. The ship's course correction at Dexter Domum –their first attempt at Planetfall– was the likely trigger. Tacking to a different star –a brief rocket burst complicated by a chaotic burn or a gravitational anomaly– and the tether was hopelessly cut.

Whether Lo was from the homeworld or not didn't matter in the end. If he was, their ancestral planet would be so unrecognizable as to be alien. If his people, like her people, were colonists from somewhere else, their culture would be as foreign. Regardless, Dru wouldn't be able to tell the difference.

"His eye… When did that happen?" Lo asked, his own black eyes honed on the civil engineer's affliction.

“Months ago, back home in Vespera,” Dru replied, unsure if the stranger knew the definition of ‘month.’

“This isn’t your home?” Lo asked, gesturing to the valley and the station on which they stood.

Dru shook her head. “We’ve only just discovered this place. Vespera —our home— is thousands of kilometers shadoward.”

Lo shook his head. “The yield shouldn’t have been so high,” he said, gazing skyward at The Rip’s static density waves. “Thousands of kilometers is impossible.”

“Kilometers?” Dru asked, surprised the stranger referenced a common metrology standard.

He nodded then spoke something inaudible.

“—What’s he saying?” Hadrian interrupted.

Dru shushed the scientist as she struggled with the synthesized Esperanto.

“They miscalculated the probabilities… the yield,” Lo said, his words barely recognizable.

“Lo. Speak slowly. Your translator… I'm struggling. What yield?”

“The yield of the ‘probability transfer function’ should have been more focused, not so widespread.”

Lo walked into the station’s interior. The spider followed him to the entryway, then did an about-face as if standing guard.

Dru gazed at the robot's cluster of lenses, focusing and refocusing, emulating Sinister's organic arachnid variants in uncanny fashion.

Lo had shot Roman for attacking his pet. But once incapacitated, the stranger was indifferent. Guided by another sense, Lo's aloofness indicated he'd downgraded the Vespans as a non-threat. Dru, as the weapons officer, was intimidated by his situational awareness and martial acumen. Whether trained or programmed, the stranger had an animal-like focus. His wounding of Roman wasn't a vengeful act, per se, it was clinical. But this was little consolation to the radioman, now shivering from the weapon's burn. Dru held-off administering more pain medication. An overdose was beyond her talents to manage.

No one said anything for minutes. Milius kneeled on the platform deck and stared at the spider, who in turn stared back at him. Roman gripped Dru's hand, his fingernails squeezing painfully into her palm as she watched Hadrian pace about in a harried rhythm. Pleading with him to calm down, Dru finally ordered the scientist to sit.

"What did Lo say before he walked off?" Hadrian asked, dropping to his knees.

"He mentioned The Rip. He'd his own name for it. But the words he used didn't make sense, something mathematical, statistical.

He talked about a ‘yield’ being off,” Dru said, aware that ‘yield’ in Old Esperanto was a word that meant ‘quantity produced’. “Something went wrong.”

“Yield… ,” Hadrian repeated, his eyes aimless as his mind churned. “Next thing –do your best– what did he say about The Rip specifically? What words?”

Dru relayed Lo’s utterances as best she could. ‘Probability transfer function’, a mathematical sounding expression that meant nothing to her, but meant something to the scientist. Conversational Esperanto had drifted significantly over the centuries. But for technical definitions, the old dialect was similar to High Esperanto. The words ‘probability transfer function’ –as esoteric as it sounded– broken down into its components, indicated The Rip was a transport system. Where from, and where to, was anyones’ guess. Ludoviko’s partial transfer into the stranger’s netherworld was evidence, but The Rip’s mechanics –or its ‘function’– was an enigma. Lo’s presence was no accident; he came equipped and prepared. His low-fidelity translator, along with his environment suit, indicated he’d a crude appreciation for the planet. But why was he here? If his world had created The Rip as a space-time bridge, then why travel to an obscure bleak planet settled by religious zealots?

While Hadrian pondered the physics problem, mumbling ad-

infinitum, “the energy to create such a thing…”, Milius engaged Dru with less philosophical matters. Roman had passed out, his head laying in Dru’s lap as she stroked his hair.

“From what you said, and from what I can tell, the stranger didn’t know what they were doing when they created The Rip,” Milius said, tapping the black orb surrounding his hidden eyeball.

“It’s a mess, half the planet –all the way to the glacial headlands– spheres embedded in seracs and ice caves deep in the shadowlands… a cataclysmic engineering folly,” Dru said. “– Besides the swaths of empty playas in Tajigo near Urbo, The Rip is always within eyeshot. It’s pervasive.”

“Pervasive is a relative word, I suppose,” Milius said, looking up at the sea of black spheres.

“If this version was a mistake –or a partial mistake– Lo seems to be remorseless,” Dru said, believing that nothing was lost in clunky translations, and Lo was truly incurious.

“So, which one of these billions of spheres did this stranger hatch from?”

“If you interpreted Lo correctly, The Rip’s emergence was a matter of ‘probability,’” Hadrian interjected.

“Why don’t we just ask him?” Dru suggested.

“Quite a chore, isn’t it?” Milius said, referring to the

translator’s tedious back-and-forth.

Dru nodded.

“If his homeworld —wherever that may be— created The Rip, they’ve an obscene amount of power at their disposal, as Hadrain keeps mentioning. Power we can’t even theorize. And what’s their plans for us? For Sinister?” Milius asked.

Dru shrugged.

“The strangers, I don’t think, are to be trusted. This is a cataclysm, and that stranger is its catalyst. Look at what he did to Roman.”

“Milius,” Dru said, gently moving Roman’s head from her lap to rest it on her scrunched rucksack. “We have to deal with Lo. We’re going to have to throw our lot in with the stranger. Sinister is damaged, agriculture interrupted, land ruined by immovable byproducts of an alien experiment, buildings wrecked, cities frozen with obstacles —and you, more than anyone, should appreciate its ruin,” she said, gesturing to his eye. “We were hopeless, near death with no answers, and here we are…”

“—Damn!” Hadrian blurted. “I’d let the stranger, and that spider of his, vivisect me if it bought the truth. We’ve no choice, it seems.”

Milius stayed put as Dru and Hadrian wandered into the shadows of the operations center. They found Lo reclined on the remnants

of an articulated chair. He was eating. He acknowledged them with a head nod and offered them a pouch of his colorless paste. Dru took it as a gesture of good-faith and scooped out a bite with Lo's tong-like utensil. To call it bland would've acknowledged flavor. Dru passed the shiny package to Hadrian. He tried some, his face pinched in mild disgust.

"You don't like it?" Lo said, his translator garbled with mastication. "Try another."

He pulled out a second package —another color— from a satchel that conformed to the bulges of his odd suit. Dru was surprised how little he carried, wondering if he'd a cache stowed elsewhere. Dru and Hadrian tried to refuse, but Lo insisted.

"We don't want to exhaust your provisions," Dru said, trying to find an excuse.

"I'm leaving soon. It's okay. Take it," he said.

Dru fiddled with the pouch until she managed to tear it open. The color was a reddish brown, matching the packaging. Protein maybe. She tried a bite then looked at Lo, confused. It tasted the same, a pasty starch from before, flavorless. She tried another bite, then passed it to Hadrian not wanting to dwell on Lo's failed attempt at goodwill.

"That one is my favorite," Lo said, eating the rest of the package he'd just offered.

“Lo, we have a few questions, if you’ll oblige us?” Dru asked.

Lo started to speak then broke into a raspy cough that lasted the better part of a minute. Yellow mucous wetted his upper lip. Dru stood back, afraid of catching the same disease that felled the dead stranger.

“Are you okay?” Dru asked. “When we came across your comrade—”

“—Li,” Lo said. “He arrived before me. He succumbed before I could rendezvous, or so I assumed.”

“Do you have his disease?”

Lo smiled like an automaton. His expressions were artificial, betraying any non-verbal cues.

“It’s not a disease. It’s a condition, and I’ve avoided the worst of it. Calculations were off when Li was sent. He suffered an ‘inference error’. He was sent via a sub-optimal node,” Lo tried to explain.

Dru translated the best she could, but Hadrian gathered little from her attempts. The scientist asked if the word ‘calculation’ might have a different interpretation, but Dru was adamant.

“Calculations, can you explain?”

“Optimizing the electro-gravitational fields, an inversion of the discrete element simulations. Or something like that. It’s beyond my understanding; I’m just a traveler.”

“A traveler?”

Dru translated for Hadrian. The scientific terms exceeded her vocabulary, so she inferred Lo's intent, much to Hadrian's dissatisfaction.

"A mathematical maelstrom?" Hadrian repeated. "Are you sure that's what he said? —That's colorful. Did it sound like a single word or multiple words?"

"Syllables," Dru said, frustrated. "—I don't know, Hadrian," she shrugged, exasperated.

"We sent thousands of probes through," Lo continued, gesturing at the spider. "But only two returned intact and operational. The others malfunctioned… their brains had failed and they became unpredictable."

Dru thought of the determined spider inside the sphere. It had managed to crawl back but failed to drag Ludoviko with it. Stuck for a week or more, the robot ran open-loop, frozen. Dru tried to communicate the instance to Lo, but he was uninterested, idly nodding while he finished his paste.

"I found a probe where I emerged," Lo muttered, static garbling every other word. "Fragile and brittle, it fell apart when I touched it. Nothing but dust. A bad calculation."

"Where did you emerge? How far away?" Dru asked timidly, trying to be as specific as possible.

"Eight, maybe ten days travel," he said, tossing his empty

food container to the floor and pitching his eating utensil out the empty wall of windows.

"Ten days?" Dru said, thinking for a moment. "Days… like homeworld days?"

Days were an archaic time unit slaved to cycles of sunlight and darkness –or 'nights'– as a planet rapidly spun on an axis. But the number of hours, minutes, and seconds that comprised an ancient homeworld 'day' was unknown.

"The 'homeworld'… do you mean 'Tero'?"

"Tero," Dru said, referencing the old name. "Did you arrive from Tero?"

"Tero is no more."

"No more?"

Lo shrugged.

"Then how did you find us?"

Lo didn't answer, but flashed his empty smile and then went about fiddling with his gauntlet's buttons. Despite his 'alieness', Dru accepted that he really didn't know. He was just an agent, more of a pilot than an ambassador.

He stood up and shuffled about as he played with its indicator. Wandering over to the empty windows, he looked out over the rift, focusing on a canyon at the far end, where the lake narrowed into a slow moving river. After aligning with the

gauntlet’s compass, he turned to Dru as if to speak, but said nothing.

“The Nexus, that’s what we call it,” Dru said, using the word ‘center’ in Esperanto. “Milius –the one with the eye– can see it. Before we found Li’s glove and your compass,” she said pointing at Lo’s gauntlet. “Milius guided us here. We trekked here to find it.”

“Why?” Lo asked.

“We needed answers. This cataclysm, this… ‘probability transfer function’ as you call it,” Dru said, careful to parrot Lo’s words,” has upended everything. It’s intolerable. So, we were sent. Maybe you can help us?”

Lo nodded, lacking anything considered sincerity. She tried to force herself to not read too much into it. Expressions weren’t necessarily universal.

“I need to go,” Lo said.

“Can we come with you?” Dru asked, knowing the stranger was most certainly headed to the Nexus.

Lo looked at Dru with his empty eyes, until at last he nodded.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN: THE NEXUS

Lo didn’t sleep, at least not that anyone noticed. As they followed him along the shores of the shifting river, Dru grew tired of convincing him to make camp. When he did eventually stop, he waited impatiently, fidgeting with his gauntlet and pacing about. While they slept, he wandered off with his spider to investigate the peculiarities of the rift.

Unlike the pioneer station, the canyons on the approach to The Nexus were different. The rocks were bleached gray, almost blue, and formed heaps of round boulders that defied gravity. Lodged in the cracks, black junipers and tar pine perched like insects. Among the cliffs were relics of the pioneers. Automated monitoring stations, fitted with wiry antennas, sat vigil over patches of once irrigated terrain now dry and choked with

bramble. Lo scavenged the ruined installations, curiously passing the time dissembling the hardware into its components. He spoke little and offered only a few words when logistics demanded it.

After another long march, Dru persuaded him once again to stop. His empty stares, head shakes, spartan words and half-sentences —exasperated by his glitchy intermittent translator— grew tedious. Asking him to repeat himself pained her, so much so, Dru chose to suffer rather than decipher his garbled static. Lo's spider halted on cue, half-collapsing into its cylindrical form. Lo stood idle, taking in their surroundings. Roman whimpered and fell against a large boulder, his eyes red and lips pale. The wound sapped his strength. Dru had fashioned a sling for his arm and tried to refresh the bandages. Like a child, he writhed as she removed the old dressings.

"I've been thinking about it. He avoids the river and hugs the canyon walls in the narrow spots. Maybe when the river switches, we could rush him and push him into a whirlpool," Roman seethed, teeth chattering. "I don't think he can swim."

"—Stop Roman. It's pointless."

"But look what he did to me?" Roman said, lips quivering as he lifted up his arm.

"It was a miscalculation, an error, an accident, not cruelty,"

Dru said, tending to him.

Roman shook his head and started to weep. Dru tended to forget his age; he was young. His pilgrimage to the center of The Rip, and ultimately its creators, had turned from one of promise into a harrowing ordeal. She'd warned him not to graft hope onto the phenomena, but he couldn't help himself. Like Milius's eye, The Rip shaped Roman's fate; it had freed him from his life of servitude. But in the end, The Rip's appearance was nothing more than coincidence. The gods themselves –the strangers– had failed the radioman. The aliens were as indifferent to him as Novum Pax's bureaucrats had been when he was orphaned. Instead of communing with him, they'd meted out disdain, swatting him away like a pest.

Roman shook his head. "He doesn't care. We're just bugs to him."

Dru wasn't going to convince him otherwise. After she'd tidied his sling, she sat next to him and studied the gangly stranger. Like a puppet, he walked about as if manipulated by marionette strings. His movements were 'herky-jerky' and uncoordinated. Hadrian theorized his suit was overcompensating for Sinister's more burdensome gravity.

"Have you noticed he doesn't sleep?" Hadrian said, wandering over.

“We’ve all noticed that,” Dru said. “He does in a way, though. He sits cross-legged on the ground, still as a statue. And his eyes flutter.” Dru watched him fiddle about with one of the spider’s storage pods. “His fugues last about twenty minutes. He cycles in and out, like he’s connected to a regulator or a tuner, attenuating and amplifying his conscious mind.”

“His eyes… they’re like an animal’s —and why are we following him? We know where we’re going. We don’t need him; we have Milius,” Hadrian argued.

“Lo’s an agent of the Nexus; we’re not. We’ll need him when we get there. Besides his brutal pace, I don’t think he’s dangerous. He’s not an adversary,” Dru tried to rationalize. “And Milius…”

The closer they got, the brighter The Nexus grew. So much so, it caused Milius pain. To avoid it, he walked with his head cocked. When he sat, he faced shadward. With his eyeball embedded in The Rip, he’d no way to blink and no way to avoid the white hot blur. Despite his misery, Hadrian couldn’t help but interrogate him. And as much as he could bear it, Milius tried to oblige.

The Nexus was more resolved with finer detail. Milius described geodesics made of glowing triangles. Like a corona, streamers emanated into the infinite black. Things moved in the

light like shadow puppets, mostly indistinct. He saw the flicker of spiders' legs, resolving, then dissipating into amorphous wisps. Being of sound mind, he reasoned the figments were inspired by their encounter with the spiders, like a dream; but he couldn't be sure.

The spider –or 'probe', as Lo described it– functioned as a pack-animal, a robotic version of their ill-fated isopods. It carried his spartan collection of gear, relieving him of any burden other than himself. Dru grew jealous; Lo was unencumbered and care-free. Another robot had joined them, the second spider having ambled its way into their company from one of the many finger canyons. Lo controlled both like trained beasts, using radio signals or subaudible commands. The second unit was in rougher shape. It made a terrible racket –a metallic squawk– and its movements were jilted and erratic. Only one of its yellowed lenses moved and focused, the others were dark and still, another victim of a 'bad calculation'. Despite its condition, Lo offered it to them to carry their rucksacks. A cordial gesture, Dru figured it was less courtesy and more a means to hurry up their march.

Lo hopped on the first spider and rode it. The robot dipped under his weight, then righted itself and carried on as before. The spiders were multifunctional, designed not only as

autonomous explorers but also for personal utility. Dru asked Lo if Roman could ride the second unit. Infection had taken hold, and he was feverish, his pace slowing dramatically. Lo shook his head and gave no explanation. Dru didn’t argue. She shouldered the radioman and staggered on.

At the river’s edge, beneath an overhang, they camped in the shade. Dru wrested Roman to the ground and propped him against a boulder. His eyes were red and puffy, his cheeks empty of color. Despite it being thirty degrees celsius, he still huddled into a pathetic ball, teeth chattering. She squatted next to him and grabbed his hand, holding it. His palms were clammy but he still had strength. He was desperate, and it made Dru uneasy.

He faded in and out. Sleeping or unconscious, Dru had a hard time determining either way. He babbled nonsense. Incoherent words mingled with lucidity that caught Dru off guard. She sat beside him and kept vigil. Sometimes his eyes would open and gaze and nothing, then close again. Suffering from some nightmare, she shook him awake for what felt like a minute. His moaning stopped. She saw her shadow reflected in the wet glassiness of his eyes, her tousled hair silhouetted by the zenith sun.

“Druscilla?”

“Yes, Roman.”

"Would you…" he paused, his lips trembling. His eyes looked wild and uncontrolled as if at any moment, they would roll into his head to never return.

"Would I what?"

"Would you let me kiss you? Just once."

Dru paused and shook her head. Delirium had lowered his inhibitions. His ongoing inner dialogues were now audible ramblings driven by feverish pining. She pushed her finger to her lips, trying to shush him.

"I mean… not now, but sometime before I…"

"Roman. The fever and your infection… you're—"

"—I just… It's that…"

"—Stop, Roman."

"But why Delfino? What was it about him?… I… I just need… before I die. And I…"

"—Stop. You're not going to die," she said, pushing his sweat soaked hair out from his eyes. Roman, like an infant, needed a mother more than anything, and Dru had little capacity. "You're sick. You're not in your right mind."

"But I am," he pleaded with a painful grimace, grabbing tight to her sleeves

"Just rest, okay?" she said, decoupling from the boy. "This will be over soon."

He nodded, then babbled inaudibly as his words slurred. Either from the pain, the infection, or exertion, he quickly fell asleep and moved little. She rolled up a sun scarf into a ball and wedged it between the radioman's neck and shoulder, then she got up and approached the stranger. She loitered near him, hoping to catch his attention but failed. Like a statue, Lo's gaze was fixed elsewhere. Working up the courage, she stepped in front of him and gestured. After a few awkward seconds, he finally looked down.

"Where are you from, Lo? Where's your homeworld"

She'd never bothered with the question, instead trying to infer the answer from spartan clues culled from their brief interchanges.

"Ry."

"Ry?"

"Ry is our moon. Our machines live on Cy, but we seldom need to visit," Lo said. "But Ry is metal poor."

Dru wanted to ask another question —as Lo rarely said so much— but she had to be efficient. He ended exchanges abruptly, sometimes mid-sentence, and always when she asked him to repeat himself. Extended conversations were a cultural offense, or so she gathered. She paused, her lips pursed, working out the phrasing in her head. She then whispered a few dry runs until at

last she spoke.

"Why not another moon?" Dru asked anxiously.

"The other moons…" Lo started, an incredulous grin on his face, "either have no air, have acid clouds, or are too small."

"How far away is Ry from here…" Dru started, but was interrupted. Lo reached out as if to grab her neck. She took a step back.

"What is this?"

"—What're you doing?"

Dru shrank in fear, worried the stranger was about to throttle her. But he stopped short, his three gloved fingers wide and hovering just below her face. She felt a tug from under her shirt as the gold chain of her necklace slipped over her skin. An unseen force conjured within Lo's gauntlet tugged at the locket. The chain rubbed against the back of Dru's neck. Like a bauble, the locket hovered in his palm as he manipulated it without touching it. The sun caught the gold and glinted, the reflection flecking Lo's black eyes. He grinned an alien grin.

"What's it made from?"

The locket unfolded, almost like magic, the two halves separated to reveal its two small photos.

"They're pictures," Dru replied, stating the obvious. "It's made from gold."

"Oro?"

Dru nodded.

Lo paused, scrutinizing the jewelry. His eyes squinted then widened, as if they were cameras. He inspected the photos.

"Who are they?"

"The girl is my sister, Ava," Dru lied, not wanting to have to explain it.

"You know your siblings?"

Dru nodded again. "Of course."

Lo shrugged.

Then like a switch, he let go of the necklace midair. The locket fell against Dru's chest, still open. He turned and walked away as if offended. She felt foolish, but the intent of her questions wasn't to develop a rapport, it was to gather clues about Lo's homeworld. And in that, she'd succeeded. Lo came from another world —not 'Tero', not the homeworld— but an unknown place. Maybe it was an old prospect of L'Estelo Magnus, something the Capricorn pilots had dismissed. Thousands of kilometers from Urbo's archives, however, they'd no way to find out.

Dru went to the river and sat with her bare feet in the cool water.

"What did you two talk about?" Milius said, pitching pebbles

into a cluster of small whirlpools.

"'Talk' is a bit of an exaggeration," Dru replied.

"But nevertheless…"

"His people colonized their planet like our ancestors colonized Sinister, I'm certain. I have no clue what planet, what star, or how far away. Not that it matters," Dru said, mesmerized by the concentric ripples from Milius's rock splashes. "He implied they'd chosen their world, that they had options. They live on a moon among other moons, orbiting a hostile planet. Their civilization is advanced —obviously— and they use machines as slaves."

"Quite a bit to digest, there. Anything else?"

"He took an interest in my locket. The one from pioneers," she said, pulling it out from underneath her shirt.

"Why?" Milius mentioned.

"The gold. It interested him. I'm not sure why."

"Back on Tero, gold was Baphomet's bargain, time eternal, the currency of empires."

"Sinister's lousy with gold. They can have it."

"Don't be surprised if they take us up on that offer."

Dru heard a shuffle in the gravel behind her. Hadrian had eavesdropped. Hands in pockets, forehead wrinkled, he was deep in thought.

“Their ship must’ve been fast, a new engine technology beyond anything the Capricorn engineers built for L’Estelo Magnus,” he speculated.

“Why do you say that, Hadrian?” Milius asked.

“They either left Tero long after L’Estelo Magnus departed, or they arrived on this moon of theirs well before our Planetfall, or both,” he explained.

“Maybe they settled their world from someplace else?”

“Or ‘sometime else’,” Hadrian added. “However unlikely.”

“What do you mean ‘sometime else’?”

“I’m not sure,” Hadrian said, shaking his head.

“They’re advanced, awesomely so,” Milius said.

“Absurdly advanced, yes” Hadrian added. “They’ve hundreds of years to advance beyond our crude instantiations of electro-mechanical wizardry.”

“Absurdly?” Dru said

“Well… ,” Hadrian said, gesturing to The Rip. “Their ability to harvest and densify such a vast amount of energy, capable of corrupting space-time ‘in extremo’, beggars belief. I can’t even conceive of it. It’s of stellar proportions.”

Despite the Schism, the Tigans and Vespans had failed to exceed the engineering genius of Planetfall, and in fact had regressed. The resources and tools to survive Sinister were of a

different manifold than those required to transport thousands through the cold interstellar vacuum for a millennium. As such, Sinister's need to innovate had relaxed. The followers of Capricorn were happily marooned, as it were. But why –and how– did the strangers create The Rip? And on a moon no less, a geological lesser.

"Maybe The Rip was engineered on Tero –the homeworld– and they're just its users," Milius pondered.

Hadrian shook his head. "No. The Rip is a crude experiment of their own making with unintended consequences; Lo's admitted as much when he made reference to 'bad calculations'. This is something they stumbled upon, some failure-prone high-energy science suffering from critical levels of immaturity."

"Or it's an alien technology they've hijacked and clumsily misused, a buried relic, dusted off and hot-wired. Like ancient hominids, they're just pushing buttons to see what might happen," Milius said.

"Very far-fetched. They didn't arrive on Sinister at random. This was no accident. This was intended."

The landscape changed as they marched. The river disappeared into a cave and along with it, any remaining plantlife. The Vespans stopped to fill their canteens near an eddy. Too heavy, they strapped the water containers to the second spider. Lo had

no water concerns, and hadn’t once bothered to replenish his reservoirs. The stranger operated at a higher level of efficiency, his suit a finely tuned recycling microclimate Dru failed to appreciate. Lo was decoupled from the immediate needs of his Vespan companions.

The canyon broke into badlands, tessellated by plateaus and cleaved by ruffled cliffs. They followed Lo along a ledge that hugged a ridgeline. The rift’s creatures were few but not completely gone. Dru watched a lone emperor wasp circle, its hum drowning out the sounds of their own walking. The insect floated close to Lo as he rode atop his spider. Amused, he offered the buzzing creature a perch on his forearm. Dru gritted her teeth, wanting to warn him, but knowing it would go unheeded. The wasp hovered in front of him, its hashed abdomen curled underneath, stinger poised. He moved his arm about, beckoning it to land with his same empty smile.

“What’s he doing?”

“There must be no wasps where he’s from.”

The wasp grappled onto him, its forelegs and mandibles trying to find purchase. Its stinger dripped venom as it thrusted the hooked appendage at Lo’s midsection. But the attack was futile; Lo felt nothing, his suit deflecting the barb. In fact, he didn’t realize he was being attacked at all. He toyed with it,

tossing it back into the air, then grabbing it again as it dove. The stinger clacked against his chest plates. Lo held it, stroked its head, and fondled its antennae as its mandibles snapped in a frenzy.

He finally cast it off and idly swatted at it until it flew up and lingered. Dru ordered the others to get on the ground, cover their heads, and not move. This emperor wasp —if anything like its cousins in the serpentine barrens of Vespera's frontier— could kill in minutes. Once stung, the body bloated and foam accumulated in the mouth. Veins turned into a web of black as the venom surged and melted the victim's flesh from within. Then as quickly as it had arrived, the wasp buzzed away and disappeared over a cliff ledge. Soon, its hum faded into the distant hiss of flowing water. They continued on.

Roman struggled as the route steepened and grew more treacherous. He stumbled often, even as Dru and Hadrian took turns shouldering his weight. Dru could smell his wound. In an attempt to mitigate the festering lesion, she re-wrapped his arm with the tatters of her bandages, but the sour odor grew worse. The infection was leaching into his bloodstream. Sweat soaked his jumpsuit. With his fever strengthening, he'd stopped eating and was barely able to drink.

Atop the interconnected plateaus, Dru saw the white glints of

the Salis Majora across the web of chasms and canyons. Too preoccupied with Roman and their tedious march, she'd failed to notice The Rip's near complete disappearance. The transition was abrupt. The black spheres hung like a curtain in the distance, stretching off in both directions like an eyewall of a static maelstrom. Not even an odd cluster remained; the sky was empty.

"They're just… gone."

"A shockwave must have pushed them away, probably when The Rip appeared. A pulse mechanism or something," Hadrian guessed.

"But The Rip formed instantaneously."

"An 'instant' is a relative metric, I suppose. Human beings can sense a few milliseconds at best. Microseconds, nanoseconds… impossible."

Lo slowed down as he led them through the maze of interconnected mesas. Dru stopped and let Roman rest, then pulled out her binoculars. With The Rip gone, the heat surged. Sweat stung her eyes as she squinted into the eyepieces. Either a mirage or a hallucination, a mountain rose a few kilometers ahead. It was a perfect cone, its slopes clean like groomed sand. The mountain was artificial and out of place; it defied all natural phenomena. And like the spheres, it obeyed a perfect functional geometry.

"Lo mentioned this, didn't he?"

“Lo never mentions anything.”

The mountain was the location of the Nexus; It had to be. Lo checked his gauntlet several times, aligning its indicator with the distant peak. Dru zoomed in and followed the slope to its summit. Atop, a silvery glint caught her eye. She gripped her binoculars, steadying them, and focused the lenses. In size and shape, the sphere was like the other billions. But this one was unique, its surface perfectly mirrored.

“The Nexus. I see it,” Dru said, passing the binoculars over to Hadrian.

“Are you sure?” Hadrian asked.

“Certain.”

“But how can you know?”

“I just… know.”

Milius moaned as he clenched his jaw and gazed poleward. His right eye was pinched, tears making clean streaks through the grit on his face. The painful gaze was unbearable.

“Milius?”

“It’s awful,” he yowled. “I feel sick. So bright, I can’t even…”

Milius fell to his knees. His body convulsed as he wretched. Dribbles of yellow vomit spilled from his lips. Lo continued on, but the glitchy spider stayed behind and idly waited. Milius

turned his back to the mountain and its silver bead. He tried to describe the Nexus.

“It makes me dizzy. Its patterns undulate like it's turning inside out. Something’s warping my vision. Everything wavers like heat flowing in water. You infer its power —absorb it— but there’s no sense to be made from it. If I look too long, the nausea kicks in, and the spinning…”

“Can you keep going?” she asked, kneeling next to him.

“I… I don’t know.”

Dru decided to defy Lo. She studied the second spider. Using the rucksacks’ straps as makeshift stirrups, she needed to mount Roman and Milius as passengers. She approached the spider slowly. It skittered into an about-face. She put her hands in the air to show it she meant no harm. A pointless gesture, all things considered, it likely wasn’t programmed for such protocols. And its dim optical sensor was clouded up. Dru doubted it saw anything more than shadow and light. But she didn’t know what else to do.

“What if Lo lets it attack us?”

“He won’t.”

Its twitchy lens followed her as she grabbed the rucksacks and moved closer. Lo stopped and idly watched. She expected him to threaten her with his plasma weapon, but he did nothing.

Whatever the reason for his objection before, Dru's trespass wasn’t enough to enforce it now. With Hadrian’s help, she arranged the rucksacks along the hump of the spider's abdomen, then rolled their sleeping pads into a makeshift saddle, securing them with straps.

Dru helped Roman up. He sat scrunched, holding his arm, but it was more comfortable than his arduous limping. Milius sat with his back to Roman’s, facing in reverse in order to avoid The Nexus. The two looked silly atop the spider, like oversized children on a wheeled toy. Hadrian shook his head. To come all this way, across thousands of kilometers of Sinister’s most inhospitable terrain, the indignity of it…

Dru and Hadrian wandered ahead, enticing the robot to follow. She thought the half-broken spider deserved a name, as it had a kind of crude personality with its quirky malfunctions. But she couldn’t think of anything endearing, until the name inexplicably popped into her head.

“Come, Lu!” she shouted, patting her thighs and encouraging it like a baby. “Up with you. Let’s get moving.”

Hadrian looked at her oddly.

“How do you know its name?” he asked, watching the spider push itself up on its wobbly legs, its mechanisms adapting to the awkward load.

“I made it up.”

“I get it,” he said after a pause. “Lo… Li… Lu…”

Dru shook her head and tried to smile. The muscles in her cheeks felt tight, the caked dirt cracking and sloughing off her face.

“No,” she smirked.

Hadrian looked at her bewildered.

“‘Lu’, short for ‘Ludoviko’”

Hadrian shook his head, bemused.

Their caravan caught up to Lo as he approached the base of the mountain. The landscape had consolidated. The canyons and chasms narrowed into cracks no wider than a few meters. The ground rose and fell in ever deeper crests and troughs, symmetrical and nearly perfect. Hadrian described a mathematical function —a ‘bessell’— that represented the warping of the ground underfoot. Dru was too tired and weary to pay much attention. However, the scientists’ monologues always calmed her, distracting her in such a way that her stress and heat-induced tinnitus faded into the background.

“Lo, I want to apologize,” Dru said, catching up with the stranger. “You told me ‘no’ when I asked if we could ride the spider, but we did it anyway. Roman’s very sick, you see, and Milius’ with his eye…”

Lo said nothing, empty eyes fixed on the route ahead. At last he turned and acknowledged her with a befuddled look, a look all too familiar. After more awkward moments, he finally spoke.

“I don’t remember being asked anything.”

“It was a while ago, but I remember well.”

“What did I say?”

“You shook your head.”

“I don’t understand,” Lo said, his face turning from confusion to annoyance.

“You shook your head, ‘no’. You didn’t want us riding the spider. I assumed you had your reasons. I just didn’t want to…”

Lo turned and walked on, prompting Dru to realize the stranger had no real objections at all; he just couldn’t understand what she had asked. He was ambivalent. Her voice was so much garbled synthetic ‘shusher’ speech to him, poorly translated from a misfiring translator. Like a pest, he’d batted her away. Her neck and chest tightened with guilt. She could have saved Roman and Milius kilometers of misery, but she hadn’t. How was she supposed to know? Intimidated by the stranger, she’d avoided advocating for her desperate companions. The risk was too great; she had to be careful, she reasoned. Lo had a weapon, and she did not.

The heaving salt pan transitioned to the slopes of the

mountain proper. As they climbed, the spiders skidded on wobbly legs. Dru soaked her jumpsuit in sweat, zinc oxide melting down her neck and along her back. Hadrian straggled behind. Lo's power-assisted suit hissed and hummed as he fought for balance. After the lead spider slipped and nearly tumbled, Lo changed tactics. Instead of straight up, they spiraled up along a traverse like a helix. Cocked at an angle, Dru's ankles burned with strain, her calves trembling. The spiders however, had an easier go of it, spikey feet gripping the hardpan as it found shallow purchase.

The slopes were smooth and lacked geology, no strata, no weathering, no aggregate. Dru glanced at the horizon. The view provoked dread. They'd reached The Rip's epicenter at last; the Nexus was its source, its wellspring. So close, she could feel its pull like a strange gravity.

The mountain and its base resembled frozen waves of a rock plopped into a water bucket. The wall of spheres at the horizon resembled the bucket itself, a perfect circle in terminus. Nothing was visible beyond. The rift valley lay hidden behind The Rip's thick canopy. The elevation had caught up to them, compounded by the thin polar atmosphere. Dru fought for breath while Hadrian fell further behind, his skin pale and face gaunt.

Another hour, maybe less, she told herself, and they'd be

there. Just a little further and the expedition would be over, ‘over’ lacking any formal definition. Oxygen deprived, Dru struggled to sort her emotions. For better or worse, her and her raggedy companions were Sinister’s emissaries to its cataclysm. They represented the culmination of centuries of their planet’s struggle and survival. And for that, they needed to be respectable witnesses. Respectable, despite the possibility that no one in Novum Pax would ever know what had become of them.

Regardless of Hadrian’s opinion, their journey was more pilgrimage now and less scientific. Even after Sinister’s reformations and schism, the ghosts of Capricorn persisted. Just as the priests commissioned L’Estelo Magnus to reunite their people with the cosmic elder god, Dru —weapons officer— was now the de-facto ordained, commissioned to commune with the cataclysmic agents of their upheaval. While she’d deluded herself with epic notions of revelation, the reality was more pathetic. They were strays following a more powerful entity, an alien that cared little, never bothering to inquire about their plight. Dru tried to explain themselves —as she felt it was her duty— but Lo cared not. He’d presumed enough to satiate his feeble curiosity. They were just nomads, primitives, and savages to him, features in the landscape. But they’d made a bargain, not with Lo of course, but with themselves.

At the core of their quest was The Rip and ‘The Nexus’, mysterious, shiny, and tantalizing. But now, they’d been given a glimpse into the workings of the phenomena, however clunky and incomplete. With such knowledge, The Rip’s mystery waned. Their bargain was that in exchange for the reveal, the madness of the expedition would end. In its place would be a dull arduous aftermath, survival, and nothing more. But what they hadn’t bargained for was the sobering understanding that they were nothing more than set pieces —player-actors— in another being’s drama.

Dru regretted Roman’s injury of course, but she also regretted throwing their lot in with Lo. They shouldn’t have followed him, but it was too late. They would’ve likely encountered him eventually —they were both bound for The Nexus— but it would’ve bought time, time for more theories and mysteries. The ‘not knowing’ was more impetus than incomplete puzzle pieces Lo had offered them. Despite his otherworldliness, Lo was still human, and The Rip was a human creation. The divine return of Baphomet —’As Above, So Below— and the echoes of Capricorn’s pantheon remained a myth. The Rip wasn’t judgment; it was calamity.

The Nexus was imminent. Dru looked at the summit and saw more of the mirrored orb as they wound their way higher. Nearly a kilometer into the air, the sky turned a deep indigo. Hadrian

made mention of Delfino’s map with all its vague polar topography, however begrudgingly. It pained the scientist to admit the Tigans were more correct than he could ever imagine. Where The Rip clouded the horizon, Dru looked for mountain ranges or glints of a vast salt sea. But the black pixelated haze played tricks. Perceived patterns formed structure like abstract art. Dru wanted to ask Hadrian to confirm the odd visual artifacts, maybe stop and have a look with her binoculars, but there was no time. Lo kept a steady pace.

The summit was perfectly rounded, the mirrored sphere suspended above like a frozen droplet. Lo stopped as everyone – including the spiders– crowded behind him. Without hesitation, he stuck his arm into the quicksilver, testing it. Milius cowered and moaned as he contorted to avoid looking at it. The moment was anticlimactic. The sphere, while a near perfect mirror, was no bigger or smaller than the other billions of spheres. Dru gazed at her distorted comical reflection with her enlarged head and tiny body. Reflected in the distance behind her was an ideal symmetry. Two hemispheres, one blue and one white, reflected the blue sky and white salt pan, banded by The Rip’s black.

Dru realized Lo hadn’t formally invited them to travel back. She assumed as much, but Lo mentioned nothing. Dru imagined the

other side as Milius perceived it, a monochrome astral plane of mechanical phantoms and darkness. Could they survive? Could they even breathe? Only a few spider probes had returned to Lo's world. If the probability transfer function 'miscalculated' on the return, would anyone know? Dru's chest tightened as she imagined a malfunction that stranded them between states. They would be stuck in a netherworld, a non-space, relegated to perish in a cosmic oubliette.

Ludovikio's dead eyes, what had they seen within? In what suboptimal locus of The Rip's vast portal network had he been stuck? Half-way through, he'd remained alive —that much was certain— but what had sustained him? Had the broken spider —hellbent on dragging him within— supplied him with air, water, food? Dru's stomach churned thinking about the Tigan's limbo. Simultaneously in two worlds, water ingested in one end then excreted light years away, puddles of piss piped in from distant stars. She closed her eyes and tried to think of something else.

"Lo! How do we go about this?"

The stranger fidgeted with his translator unit then asked her to repeat herself, which she did.

"What's beyond? What about temperature, the air, gravity? Are there any customs we need to be aware of? Anything that may be misinterpreted? Any quarantine protocols?" Dru asked, trying not

to overwhelm or confuse him.

He looked surprised. Such concerns weren't a priority. Disease mitigation –dragging a distant alien pathogen to your home planet– would no doubt be a primary worry, as it had been for humanity's entire existence.

"We've methods, procedures, and processes to create a necessary buffer."

Dru paused, rehearsing what she was about to say next. "Are your people expecting… us?" she asked.

Lo didn't answer right away, but looked out at the horizon. "Specimens are ancillary" he said, his electronic Esperanto less distorted than normal. "My goal was to perform my mission to the proper standards and specifications as communicated to me. That was the primary objective."

"You called us… specimens. That seems rather… mission specific, clinical. Is that all we are to you, or are we something more?", Dru asked, hoping for a glimmer beyond his ambivalence.

"You are…" he paused, " a contingency."

"A contingency for which you were prepared? Or…"

"A contingency in which we weren't thoroughly trained," Lo replied. "And for that, I have regrets."

"Fair enough," Dru said, as her voice trembled, tears welling.

“Why are you crying?” Hadrian asked, bewildered. “What did he say to you?”

Dru hadn’t asked much of Lo throughout the duration of their encounter, and his admission was a rare slice of sympathy in a vast wilderness of indifference. Maybe she misinterpreted him once again, but she’d little energy or inkling to ask for clarification.

Lo’s exit from Sinister was quick and unceremonious. With a few adjustments to his gauntlets and a hand motion, he casually entered The Nexus, the quicksilver enveloping him. Only his feet were visible, and then as if climbing a ladder, he vanished. His spider robot followed, disappearing with him. The mountaintop grew quiet as the stranger’s pneumatic and hydraulic mechanisms, along with his machine, disappeared into oblivion.

“Well?” Hadrian said, gazing at his reflection. “Into the looking glass, Alice?”

“Alice?”

“An ancient phrase…”

“Milius, Roman, let’s get you off of Lu. We’ll transition on foot. If Lu follows, he follows,” Dru ordered.

“I’m not going,” Milius said, climbing off the back of the spider robot, careful to ensure he faced outward and away.

“You’re going through, Milius. That’s all there is to it. I’m

not leaving you here.”

He shook his head.

Dru looked at Hadrian and Roman. Roman was barely lucid, his flesh pale and shiny with sweat, eyes unfocused and wandering.

“Help Roman through, Hadrian,” Dru ordered. “We’ll be right behind you.”

“—No, I’m not going,” Milius shouted.

“Now, Hadrian,” Dru said, ordering the scientist.

Without saying a word, Hadrian collected their rucksacks and whatever spartan gear remained, then helped Roman through the Nexus. Dru watched in disbelief. One moment they were there, and then they were gone, leaving Dru, Milius, and the spider robot Lu alone atop the mountain.

“I still have it in my rucksack, if you want me to read it,” Dru said, patting one of the flaps.

“Have what?”

“Your commission letter from the premier of Vespera in Novum Pax. It details your conscription. I have the authority to retain your services, by force if necessary,” Dru said. “You’re not a volunteer.”

“You can’t be serious, Druscilla? I’ve fulfilled my obligation,” Milius argued. “That was the whole point of the conscription. To get us here. Right here.”

"As a de-facto senior rank, that's up to me now. And I need you to go through with me," Dru commanded, conjuring as much authority as she could. "I need resources for whatever lies beyond, and you're still a resource."

Milius sat on the slope, knees tucked to his chest and shaking his head like a child. Dru felt pity. Within a few meters of the answer, his will had failed. He wasn't a coward, not as Dru knew him. He'd shown no weakness or frailty the whole journey, even during his abduction. Was it the pain of The Nexus, the white hot sun within his netherworld? Dru doubted it. Ludoviko's cruel headshot had blistered his skull, yet he regarded it as only a nuisance. She thought she understood him, but she'd been mistaken.

"It's not like you imagined it, is it?"

Milius looked up, his right eye wet with tears. He opened his mouth as if to speak but said nothing.

"You're not afraid of what's beyond," Dru continued. "You're afraid that it won't be anything like you thought, that it will pale in comparison."

"Since it appeared," Milius started, "it's always different, everytime I look at it. The Nexus is a million different things at once, and all those realities are mine. No one else's, not scientists, not physicians, not philosophers, not prophets,"

Milius said, looking out at the edges of The Rip.

“But you’ll know finally. No more speculation.”

“I’ve lived so long without knowing. I’ve gotten used to it. Like a companion.”

“I need you to come with me, Milius. I need you to see beyond this reality to whatever reality lies within. You’ve thought about this more than anyone. You live it. We need a guide for what awaits us.”

“What if it’s an abomination? What if it’s terrible? ”

“Why would it be terrible?”

“The truth is always terrible.”

“I don’t understand.”

“My sister’s autopsy. That’s when they discovered the worms… everywhere. That’s when we finally knew. Monsters were living inside of us. I’d a procedure to remove them, and by the time I’d recovered from anesthesia, my mother was gone. Suicide. The truth killed her. It’s enough to know that it’s real. It’s enough to know it wasn’t an artifact, a figment, a hallucination.”

“This isn’t the same, Milius,” Dru said, kneeling down to hold his hand. “The Nexus… is real. It’s not a deception. It has no agenda. You think these strangers would put any effort into fooling us? It seems impossible, and after spending time with

Lo, ridiculous. They could care less about any of us."

Milius nodded slowly in agreement.

"We need to bear witness to it; you need to bear witness. We owe it to everyone."

"Everyone?"

"The dead in the L'Estelo Magnus hulk back there," she said, nodding in the direction they'd come. "We owe it to the pioneers in the rift, our companions that died along the way. My sister. We owe it to Novum Pax and Vespera. We even owe it to Delfino and Ludoviko and Urbo. And you owe it to the people you once loved. You owe it to your sister. Now let's go."

Dru gripped Milius's hand tight and she pulled him to his feet. Once standing, she embraced him and held him close. With his head resting on her shoulder, she felt him relax. He started to cry and she held the back of his head, shushing him like a parent would a child. Dru then repositioned and clinched her arms around his chest tightly, then lifted him off the ground. And then with a heave, she pushed him into the liquid silver. Before he could fight back, they'd crossed the threshold, beyond the membrane of their world and into another.

CHAPTER NINETEEN: THE LEFT EYE OF MILIUS

Bashing itself against the concave wall, the wasp buzzed about as it tried to escape. It stopped for a moment and slid towards them. With little room to maneuver, they shifted about and tried to climb to avoid the menace. Before it could skitter into them, the wasp again took flight, carrying on in its futile dance. Roman, lethargic and sick, crawled under Lu's carapace to avoid the insect. Lo, of course, stood his ground and watched the frantic thing, fascinated.

"It must have tried to land on The Nexus and fell through," said Hadrian. "I'm surprised there isn't a pile of detritus piled up here. Quite a trap."

"This chamber's liminal. I don't think anything remains for very long," Dru replied.

They were at the bottom of a spherical chamber, vastly larger than the Nexus's mirrored orb back on Sinister. Light filled the space from ambient shimmers racing along the metallic surface. Within the shimmer, honeycomb patterns appeared and disappeared. The air was thick with ozone and the gravity had changed. After months of thirty degrees centigrade in the Salis Majora, The Nexus was cool, even chilly.

Despite his suit and the curvature of the floor, Lo stood differently than he had before, taller, his back straight, his shoulders wide. He'd torn off his helmet and the translator with it. It sat discarded at his feet, wrecked. Dru spoke to him, but he only nodded. He was fiddling with his gauntlet and speaking his 'shusher' language into an unseen radio, a conservation, but the tone was ambiguous.

The transition from Sinister was not the psychedelic journey foreshadowed in Dru's dreams. She had heaved Milius's eighty kilos up into the Nexus, but once through, the sensation was that of tripping and falling, a stark shift in temperature, but no otherworldly out-of-body voyage. Toppling down, Milius and Dru slid to the bottom and collided with the others where she immediately heard the frenzied buzzing. She shouted warnings to Lo, but he was preoccupied. Somehow he'd inferred the wasp's lethal menace was deterred by its predicament, trapped in The

Nexus’s alien bug jar.

She hadn’t noticed at first —no one had— but the black orb lodged in Milius’s skull had disappeared. After months, in the thrall of another dimension, his left eye remained functional. Cosmetically, however, it was another matter.

Shielded from the sun for months, the blotchy white circle around his orbital made him look clownish. But it was the eyeball itself that was most peculiar. The iris had changed. His right eye was a deep brown, but his left eye had an inhuman tint. Within his expanded iris, a sickly violet framed his permanently dilated pupil. The white of his eye —what was left of it— was pink with enlarged blood vessels. After minutes of double-vision, Milius’s normal sight returned, but his astral seeing was no more.

“Where are we?”

Dru knew where they were in a general sense —another world, maybe Lo’s moon Ry— but where specifically was a fact known only to Lo. The middle of a city, aboard a ship on a vast liquid ocean, an anomalous dimension that defied conventional physics, a nether-space theorized by mathematicians —they could be anywhere. Dru was certain, however, they could not return the way they came. The Nexus membrane flowed only in one direction.

The wasp half-fluttered and half-crawled along the chamber

when shapes broke through the ceiling. An aperture formed from pixelated geometries, expanding and recombining like puzzle pieces. The euclidean multitudes frothed into cubes and pyramids, swirling like a vortex to reveal a shaft. From within, a column descended, it too was constructed from the same shifting canonical solids. Lo was unbothered by the fluid display as he toggled unseen switches rendered by his gauntlet. In tandem, both spiders folded into their narrow cylinders. Lu suffered a glitch and failed to fully convert, leaving a few legs comically akimbo.

They stood back as the column reached the floor and oozed out into a platform. Nascent chairs emerged in a radial pattern as the structure morphed. Lo gestured for them to sit. Dru picked up Roman and shouldered him over and sat him down. With his fever raging, a cool draft triggered violent shivers. His arm had turned a different color. It was swollen with a tightness that ballooned his flesh. He no longer winced when she bumped him as the tissue had necrotized. He needed medicine and surgery. Without it, he’d a few hours left before his organs started to fail.

The chairs molded to their bodies while disembodied arms latched onto the spiders’ cylinders, lifting and stowing them higher up on the structure. The wasp, having found its escape,

flew up and disappeared into the darkness of the widening void. The column twisted as it rose through the aperture. Beyond, a tunnel filled with undulating biomechanical textures surrounded them. The continuous spiraling made Dru nauseous. She pinched her eyes shut as her stomach soured. She heard the others moan in discomfort. The journey was slow as minutes turned into fractions of an hour.

"Lo, is this going to end soon?" Dru shouted above the amorphous elevator's clickety din, hoping for a nod or a head shake. She quickly opened her eyes and looked at the stranger to see if he'd heard her.

"Equilibrium," Lo replied.

Taken aback, Lo spoke with his own tongue. So used to his 'shusher' babble and the tinny squeaks of Esperanto, she wasn't sure if it was him or not. Had he learned the language in secret, or had he adapted to Esperanto through some osmotic technique?

"What did he say?" Milius asked.

"Equilibrium —I'm not sure what he means," Dru replied. "I could have misheard, or…"

Hadrian pondered the word and hypothesized a mechanism —or a need— for equalization. Under high air pressure, human beings needed to slowly decompress to normal atmospheric levels. Too

sudden a change and blood would fizz from dissolved gas. A quick but brutal death. But no one noticed any bodily changes in the transition from Sinister to the Nexus chamber, no dizziness or pain. Maybe the air pressure was more dense, or the Nexus was beyond anything Hadrian could admittedly conceive, the transition being of a higher order abstraction.

"Maybe it's a space-time equalization, or something."

"…or something."

Dru thought of the L'Estelo Magnus hulks touching down on Sinister after a millennia in space. Asleep for centuries, she wondered if the awoken were overwhelmed by that first glimpse of a new world, or were they too consumed with the immediacy of survival. She wondered how she and her companions would be received, unkempt primitives stumbling into a world of advanced aliens. Those seeing Sinister's denizens for the first time would think the worst, she was sure. Their jumpsuits were stiff with filth and their skin leathery from the sun. Milius –who'd made a valiant attempt at keeping himself sorted– looked as disheveled as the rest of them now. His hair was matted and a thick stubble clung to his jaw and neck. They looked like serfs.

Tethered by a loose human ancestry, would they think them unworthy savages? She thought of the lost opportunities to clean up, stitch and wash their clothes, and sort themselves. But her

sense of urgency had forced a single-minded dash to the Nexus. They had to, they had to keep up with Lo; they needed him. To arrive unescorted would provoke a misunderstanding, or worse.

“Like the wasp,” Dru repeated. “They’re going to think we’re a pest, a bug, an animal.”

“They won’t,” Milius said, trying to assure her. “This wasn’t an accident, Druscilla. They sought us out. You don’t travel as far as they’ve come if it was about something else. They knew of Sinister beforehand. They knew we existed.”

“I don’t think they thought much about it. I think it’s nothing more than an experiment. Lo never hinted it was otherwise.”

“Regardless, but we should allow ourselves to be surprised,” Milius said.

“I don’t like surprises.”

The others gasped. Dru felt the space expand. After a deep breath, she opened her eyes again. Monochrome muddled the world surrounding her. No sky above. They’d stopped at another chamber, this one much bigger. Through haze and steam, geodesic walls of patina emerged and formed a vast dome around them. Dru guessed it was a factory, or a military or industrial staging area. The floor was filled with incomprehensible machines that defied simple explanation. Amongst the bedlam, pipes, ducts, and

conduits linked buildings and structures while things crawled around like ants in a nest. Their speed was purposeful, and their movement hinted at something like an assembly line. But what was being assembled wasn't clear. Claustrophobic, Dru felt her abdomen tighten.

"This place… it's so ugly," Hadrian blurted, his voice drowned out by the automated cacophony.

"Some brutal utility at work to justify all this," Milius muttered.

The pixelated lift, including their chairs, dissolved into liquid and was absorbed by the floor. The aperture constricted until only a smooth surface remained. A contingent of people surrounded them. A ceremony. Among those in the assembled crowd stood two men Dru suspected were 'shusher' officials, dressed in uniforms too elaborate to be practical. A few men in utility smocks crowded around Lo, scanning him with diagnostic handheld instruments. The remainder of the lot Dru guessed were soldiers or paramilitaries. They stood at attention, sporting additional gear —possibly weapons— while saluting Lo.

"A hero's welcome."

"So it would seem."

They noticed one of the technicians eyeing them. Nudging one another, the aliens walked up to greet the Vespans. From a

handheld case, they removed a set of tetrahedra. The shapes pulsed with a deep blue light, the same hue as the power plants inside the spider robots and Li's environmental suit. The technicians handed the shapes to each of them. Dru held the objects with both hands. They were heavy, dense like gold, even with the lighter gravity. The Vespans looked at one another, not knowing what to do with the gifts.

Dru was about to tell them 'thank you' when the handheld devices activated. She felt a cold jolt as the tetrahedron's light disappeared. She dropped it. Her knees gave way as her body went limp. The others also collapsed. With her head against the hard floor, she gazed at the tetrahedron as its blue light returned. One of the technicians walked over, his feet a few centimeters away as she lay paralyzed.

He squatted down and looked at her with a fabricated pity, then injected a syringe-like gun into her limp forearm. Blackness was immediate.

#

When Dru came to, the grim world of the 'shushers' —as she called them— was no more. In its place was a blur of soothing light and muted color. Mechanical noises were replaced by the sounds of rustling leaves peppered with the chirps of alien birds or insects. Hidden within the soundscape was a distant

hush of water. She lay on a bed and tried to get comfortable, but her aches and soreness stubbornly persisted. Once her eyes cleared, she sat up and looked around. Her bed was in a small dormitory with her companions asleep in beds next to hers. A wall sized window let in the natural light of a different sun. The landscape beyond was familiar, yet unfamiliar. She saw trees, buildings, clouds, but their representations were foreign, derived from unknown archetypes.

A jungle stretched to the horizon, interrupted by bleached temple-like buildings. The trees varied in height, some stretching a hundred meters or more into a placid sky. Dru marveled at a world capable of producing such a lush biome. Hanging in the blue sky was a giant planet. So close, Dru studied its looming topography. Its details were as clear as a map. Striped with canyons and mountain ranges, a rainbow of beige and crimson mixed with patches of gray and orange. The colors swirled like streams of smoke. With no visible water — lakes, seas, or glaciers— the planet looked marginally habitable. As lifeless as it appeared, a web of black lines and fractal clusters broke the planet’s surface into artificial provinces.

Dru remembered Lo saying Ry was the moon upon which they lived, and ‘Cy’ was a nearby planet around which Ry likely

orbited. Cy was a machine world –as the stranger described it– relegated to robotic slaves. Cy's circuit-like layout hinted its topography was not inspired by humanity, but by some other utilitarian intelligence. In fact, Dru wondered how the 'shushers' tolerated such an eyesore. Maybe they marveled at their terraforming acuity. Cy was perhaps a trophy, a visual reminder of their hubris and dominance. A near-lifeless factory world, Cy would provide the 'shushers' with a segregated industrial capability, the vacuum of space isolating its pollutants and waste from their verdant home. Quite the advantage.

Dru was dressed in well-fitting clothes that were simple and comfortable. She supposed it was possible to fabricate such things in the time she'd been unconscious, even more so with robotic tailors. But why had they knocked her out? Just to wash and cloth her? Filthy and exhausted, she would have done so willingly; she wasn't an animal. And Dru didn't feel well rested. In fact, she remained groggy and her brain was swamped by a cognitive fog. She stood up and staggered, somewhat dizzy. Her coordination was off with the shift in gravity. Every movement was out-of-sync, exaggerated, and demanded attention. However, she noticed the quiet most of all, a quiet she'd long forgotten. The persistent tinnitus –the ringing in her ears

she’d had since she was an adolescent— was no more. She focused, trying to conjure the persistent sound, but it was simply gone.

Dru investigated the room, taking her time with each step. The lights dimmed, prompted by an unknown cue. In the corner, near the window, was a table with four chairs. She sat down. The table had been set with bowls, glasses, and spoons. Nothing else. In the middle were three carafes and a pitcher of water. Dru poured herself a glass and took a sip. The flavor was startling and unfamiliar, so much so she nearly spat it out. It tasted like tea but with a sweet citrus. The liquid had no color and was completely clear. She took another sip and then another. Once finished, she poured yet another and then finished that. The liquid was so cold, it was cathartic, especially after months of warm musty water.

Even with her alien surroundings, Dru was overcome with a tenuous ease. Rescued from the Salis Majora, she was no longer preoccupied with survival. Her anxiety dissipated, she felt it in her chest, her neck, and her gut. While a universe of uncertainty remained, the immediate questions of life and death were deferred indefinitely.

The carafes held porridge. She poured a little into her bowl. It looked the same as the pouches Lo had offered them back in the rift, a thin beige gruel that hinted at an unpalatable

blandness. But this instance was different. She sniffed the wafts of steam and took in the aroma of curried spice. She poured more and stirred it with her spoon. A deep reddish brown spiraled out from the center until the substance was a rich appetizing color. She put a spoonful into her mouth. Chewing it, the porridge had transformed into a stew, complete with chunks of vegetables. The flavor and texture was a mimic of her favorite dishes from the streets of Novum Pax, savory and filling. She emptied the bowl and drank another glass of the liquid.

After she'd had her fill, she sat back and watched the shadows slowly shift across the jungle and buildings. The sun moved, ever so slowly, and Dru was mesmerized.

"It's not real. None of this is real," Milius said, startling her. "From what I can gather, it's a highly sophisticated illusion."

"You're awake."

"I was pretending to be asleep."

"Why?"

"They were staring at us, studying us like zoo animals, so I stayed still so they would go away and leave us alone. But they'll no doubt be back," Milius explained.

"I don't understand. Who was staring at us?"

“Lo’s friends, I’m guessing. The same lot milling about when we arrived in the main chamber.”

“Did they come into the room?” Dru looked about and noticed a modest door in between the beds. “Is that where they left?” She asked, pointing.

“No. That’s the toilet,” Milius smirked. “They were at the window, actually. They didn’t come in.”

Dru got up and walked to the glass. Below was a sheer drop to the jungle canopy, no balcony or deck. Unless they hovered or dangled, she couldn’t see how they could stand outside and spy in. Her chest tightened. Was Milius in his right mind? After months of enslavement to The Nexus, had he given in to delusion? Maybe The Rip had weakened him. For all Dru knew, he’d succumb to some nascent insanity, like a phantom disease from his childhood.

“There’s no mirrors in the room –at least none that I could find– but touch your forehead,” Milius said, gesturing at a bare spot on his scalp near the hairline.

Dru aped Milius and felt a stubble patch. They’d shaved a bit of her hair. In the stubble, she felt three bumps, small, smooth plugs embedded in her flesh. She yelped and leapt back from the window. She remembered the marks on Ludoviko when they yanked him from The Rip. She remembered Li –the dead stranger– with the

same marks, as well.

"An implant?" Dru blurted, her voice trembling.

"I don't know if there's a better explanation," Milius replied calmly.

"That's why they knocked us out, isn't it? … to perform this surgery."

Milius nodded. "From what I can gather, it's a mental filter, editing our senses and swapping in more pleasant sensations. This room for instance: clean, quiet, and comfortable –or so it seems. These beds are quite something aren't they?"

"Yes. They're unreal," Dru replied.

"–Exactly. However, I'm not sure about you, but I woke up as sore and achy as I have over the past months. I think it takes time for the implant to completely trick our minds and bodies. At the moment, we're not fully duped. How was the food?"

"The flavors, so rich… I'd forgotten–"

"–But you didn't forget. Some corner of your mind conjured it back into existence, and the implant amplified it, then grafted it into your sensorium. It's like a lucid dream," Milius explained. "Unfortunately in my case, the implant didn't completely take. I have a broken connection."

"What do you mean?"

Milius told her the implant had failed to filter his left eye.

The Rip’s membrane –having isolated his visual organ for all those months– had rewired his neural pathways in such a way that made it impervious to the shusher’s tinkering. He saw two worlds now, depending on which eyelid he closed. His right eye saw the room as Dru saw it, with minor changes in bespoke color and light intensity, including the sweeping panorama outside the window. But his left eye revealed a true reality, a reality they’d briefly experienced before the technicians put them to sleep.

“We’re still here,” Milius said.

“We’re still <u>where</u>?”

“The chamber, from before.”

Through Milius’s left eye, he saw the hemispheric chamber beyond the window. The window wasn’t for their visual pleasure; it was for their minders. The dormitory was a panopticon. Where no deck existed outside, one in fact did exist. The sushers stood there -the technicians– and stared at them, taking notes with handheld devices. The dormitory was utilitarian and devoid of the luxury Dru perceived. Drab metal walls, beds with a modicum of cushioning, a mantle of wear and tear, and dim sterile lighting that did little to soften the room’s starkness.

Where Dru saw only one door, Milius saw two, the second door more substantial than the one leading to the toilet. He guessed

it was the egress, but couldn’t confirm. The door had been edited from their senses for obvious reasons. For now, Milius suspected the shushers hadn’t noticed his quirky left eye. However, having to close one or the other to avoid a maddening double-vision was conspicuous. They were sure to discover it eventually.

“I thought about trying to rig an eyepatch, but there’s nothing here I can use. The room is bare.”

“What about the toilet? Anything?”

Milius smirked then spoke. “Let’s just say there is more than a millenia separating them from us when it comes to toilet customs.”

“Milius, are you absolutely sure of what you’re telling me?”

“Yes.”

“What makes you so certain?”

“When I was sick as a child, a few wakes before my sister passed, my mother brought in an outlaw priest from the Meridiem Massif, a Capricorn mystic, in a desperate act of deceit. The mystic was malformed, eyeless, a birth defect. He chanted and carried on about the ‘demons’ within, worm-like descriptors of things ‘writhing’ and ‘twisting’, an uncanny coincidence of the parasites inside me and my sister. Blind and spun about, the mystic faced my mother and gestured towards her unintentionally.

He then shouted for the demons to be gone, pointing into her face. I remembered her look of guilt, dread, and horror. I knew then it was her that'd made us sick. It was a moment of prescience; I'd never seen my situation so clearly. I'm as sure now as I was back then. The reality the shushers want us to see is an obfuscated one."

Milius was relaxed, less meek; his speech was deliberate. The hemming and hawing from before –all the times he was asked to point to the Nexus– was gone. The overweight unsure civil engineer from Novum Pax had been replaced by a rangy magus with the ability to see truth in multiple dimensions. What once evoked pity, Dru now found intimidating.

As they talked, Roman and Hadrian woke up. Milius told them what he'd told Dru. Hadrian was brimming with questions –Dru could tell– but he was too caught up by her description of the food, and he was hungry. As such, they sat down at the table and began to eat and drink. Each one of them experienced different flavors and consistencies. Hadrian described a fruit filled cereal while Roman enjoyed lentil soup. Milius had a few bites of his 'stew' but then suddenly put the spoon down.

"By the high priests of Capricorn. Roman, your arm…," Milius gasped, both eyes wide in dismay.

No one bothered to take stock of Roman's wound yet, too

overwhelmed by their current situation. But Roman was completely rehabilitated, his health restored; he was back to his old self, upbeat and optimistic. He pulled his sleeve up, near the shoulder and inspected it. The wound had healed, leaving no scar. His flesh was as it was, including the odd mole and freckle. Dru remembered the pink swollen flesh, the beginning necrosis, and of course the smell. Dru felt relief. She marveled at the shusher's mastery of medicine, until Milius spoke.

“That’s not your arm, Roman.”

“What do you mean it’s not my arm, Milius?” Roman said, smiling with incredulity.

Milius pinched his right eye shut and reached out to touch Roman’s forearm, then recoiled. Dru and Hadrian both came to the same realization while Roman remained in willful denial. Roman’s arm had been replaced with a mechanical surrogate unbeknownst to him. The implant had integrated the prosthetic seamlessly into Roman’s nervous system. Roman flexed his hand in a panic. He rubbed his palm on the table top, scraping it on the edge, then slapping it down, causing Hadrian to jump.

“You’re not well, Milius. This is my arm and none other. It moves just the same. It stings when I hit it. How can it <u>not</u> be my arm?” Roman shouted, his voice breaking.

“The muscle looks like rope,” Milius carried on, ”webbed

together over a flexible frame. The skin is semi-transparent, like a silicon wrap. They did a wonderful job.” Milius looked over Roman’s appendage, his right eye still pinched. “You’re hand… the interlocking metal work—”

“—Stop it, Milius,” Dru ordered. “Enough. You’re scaring him. Leave it for now.”

Doubt crept into Dru. Her old suspicions and prejudices regarding Milius resurfaced. But she knew he was telling the truth. Even she had her suspicions about the dormitory before Milius had confirmed them. No one said anything. Roman’s panic subsided as he embraced the illusion, which was just as well; denial was as appropriate a response as any.

She got up from the table and walked back over to the glass. The illusion was impeccable. She focused on the details: the leaves of nearby trees, the wisps of clouds drifting overhead, flying bird-things perched on the towers. The colors were bold and high in contrast. With so much detail, she guessed the scene must have existed somewhere, just not here. She leaned against the window, resting her head on her forearm. Hadrian approached, hands clasped behind his back but saying nothing.

“Do you believe Milius?” Dru asked the scientist.

“Yes. Very much so,” Hadrian replied.

“Me too,” Dru said. The reality would have been more pleasant

if Milius had actually lost his mind. “But why the implants?”

“I think everyone gets them here, the strangers –or the ‘shushers’, as you call them– as well as ourselves. It seems a means to provide a managed aesthetic, a hybrid of a universal pleasantness commingled with our own personal sensibilities.”

“Like the food…”

“–Exactly. You would need a dominant environment everyone has in common but with a bespoke component as well. Anything less would be chaos,” Hadrian explained, enamored by the shusher’s kluged utopia. “The whole thing is really a remarkable tool of societal control. I have to hand it to our long lost cousins,”

“This view,” Dru said, gesturing at the panorama, ”is it real?”

“No,” Hadrian replied. ”As Milius said, this is a projection. Beyond it is nothing but the chamber.”

“That’s not what I meant. Does this scene actually exist… somewhere? It seems too perfect, don’t you think? The hues, the location of the planet –Cy, they call it– hanging there beyond the temples, the grouping of the trees, I see an artist's hand at work.”

Hadrian stood back and crossed his arms, staring out at the landscape. Whether he could appreciate Dru’s theory or not provoked obvious questions about the shusher’s world, and their

own, for that matter. Did the implant explain Lo’s detached behavior and his lack of emotion? Had his implant grafted masks onto their faces, removing their complexity and reducing them to two-dimensional set pieces? Or had the implant, in tandem with the suit, simply insulated Lo from Sinister to the extent that he had no incentive to engage with the Vespans.

“Maybe Ry is spoiled, loud, cluttered, and ugly, like the chamber when we arrived. Maybe the implant filters it all out for them, obscures and rinses clean the byproducts of their unsightly progress,” Dru said, carrying on.

“I wouldn't say it's as simple as all that. I’m sure they have an array of reasons why they use such sophisticated technology. And to be fair, if it wasn’t for Milius, we wouldn’t be having this conversation. And if you’re a native to it, you probably wouldn’t ever question it.”

“It’s a cultural truth, you’re saying?”

Hadrian nodded. “Back on the homeworld, when the civilized ancients encountered naked heathen savages in the wilderness, their first instinct was to clothe them. Maybe it’s something like that.”

Hadrian was right, however, no benefit could be gained by rebelling. Despite the involuntary implant and the shusher’s indifference, the most diplomatic approach was to go along with

it as best they could. Dru worried about Roman, however. He was young and wouldn’t easily accept his amputated arm, despite the fact they’d rebuilt it completely and seamlessly. Dru needed to keep an eye on him, as much as that was possible now.

CHAPTER TWENTY: THE CHAMBER

Days passed. They weren’t prisoners, at least they didn’t feel like prisoners, but their situation –as it was– mimicked exactly that. However ‘freedom’ in such a place meant little. The shushers’ world wasn’t one in which they had agency; in fact, they weren’t sure they could even breathe its air, let alone hide and assimilate. The shushers had plans for them, but Dru and the others felt no immediacy. Food was brought in while they slept, their basic needs met. Their lack of mobility became a luxury –a relief– as they no longer needed to keep moving to survive.

The cycles of dark and light –day and night– offered an easy way to gauge time. The shushers had taken their gear, including their timepieces, so how a day synced with Sinister’s wakes was

disputable. The hours were close –they all agreed– give or take a few hours. Dru slept and napped more than the others, timing her wakes to the sunrises and sunsets. She knew it was synthetic, but the performance enamored her. The golden glow, that transitioned to a purple that gave way to a tapestry of stars and planetary bodies, evoked something primal. Dru felt the pull of dormant instincts, ancient voices long lost. The others, however, were not as taken by it.

Hadrian spent his time interrogating Milius about the goings on in the chamber. Their first impression –before the shushers had knocked them out– was consistent with Milius's descriptions. However, his surveillance prompted more questions. Their consensus was the chamber was a gateway between Ry –the shusher's world– and Sinister. But its rules of use –its concept of operations– defied simple explanation. To sort his thoughts, Hadrian arrived at a cardinal question that guided their thoughts.

"Why is everything crammed into this small space?"

Milius's unfiltered view had a clear vantage over the bustling complex. Buildings clustered in the dome's middle were an operations center, an outfitting depot for personnel and crews' quarters. A platform atop functioned as a landing for yet another lift system, this one larger and used primarily for

cargo. Once a day, at random times, the roof would dematerialize into a pixelated aperture for arrivals and departures.

"What's on the lift?"

"People and equipment: the simple answer. But 'who' and 'what'… I can only describe it in rudimentary detail," Milius explained. "But know this: more equipment is arriving than leaving."

The rest of the chamber was filled with an open floor packed with a grid of automata but on a grander scale. The spiders were probes, lesser pack animals, radio repeaters, and nothing more. But the new machines were bulky and larger, even when folded up. The robots were modular, smaller components broken down from a bigger whole.

"The sphere diameters limit their size. Out of The Rip's billions, none of them ever exceeded the size of The Nexus itself. Anything transported to Sinister —randomly plonked down— and then exited via The Nexus, must conform. Something larger than a few kitted humans and five or six hundred kilos of hardware has to be brought through in pieces," Hadrian guessed. "Quite a bottleneck."

"What larger hardware are they preparing to send through?" Dru wondered.

"Not sure. But they've ambitious plans."

“I know what I’d bring.”

“What?”

“Everything.”

Milius described science equipment, prospecting gear, mobile structures, water and irrigation systems, and communications hardware. The shushers would need such things —as anyone would— to attempt a beachhead in the Salis Majora. And for reasons Hadrian couldn’t theorize, the shushers were unable to project themselves beyond the polar desert. The Rip extended over most of Sinister’s sunward half. However, the ‘probability transfer function’ had limited their arrivals to the high polar latitudes. To reach the liminal latitudes, and its civilizations, the shushers would need another means to get there.

“It’s like a mechanical centipede or a caterpillar?” Milius said, trying to describe a large pre-assembled apparatus. “It’s in dry fit, twenty meters long, segmented, with an array of articulated tracks that looks like feet.”

“Like a caravan…”

Hadrian mentioned the vastness of L’Estelo Magnus and its twenty hulks packed with everything the Capricorn pilots thought they’d need to settle an unknown world. But the starship was twenty kilometers long and vast in volume. In comparison, The

Rip was a needle to be threaded, governed by a dangerous probability that was prone to catastrophic anomalies. If their ‘calculations’ were off, their payload would arrive corrupted, as ‘Li’ and an army of failed probes already proved. Using The Rip to travel to Sinister was a perilous piecemeal endeavor.

Dru wondered why the effort, why such a monumental engineering feat to travel to their hardscrabble world. Were they establishing a trade route? A colony? And of all the planets possibly populated by humanity, why theirs?

“Maybe they’re out of salt,” Hadrian joked.

“They must’ve traveled to the homeworld, to Tero.”

“Lo said the Tero was ‘no more’, remember?”

“A planet cannot just be ‘no more’. Its mantle –the rock itself– remains. Even if the planet was sterile, wouldn’t you want to know why?”

“Maybe they know why. Maybe they’ve already traveled back?”

“No. This is a maiden voyage; I’m certain. Right now, the ‘probability transfer function’ is too clunky and dangerous.”

“Or the fate of the homeworld isn’t their concern.”

“We could be a trial run, used to demonstrate the technology’s capability, but with lesser collateral.”

“So, we’re all <u>lesser</u> <u>collateral</u>…? We should be so offended.”

While indifferent and aloof, Lo had been surprised at the

extent to which The Rip had enveloped Sinister. He'd said they'd miscalculated its 'yield' —whatever that meant. The spider probes failure rate clipped a harrowing ninety-nine percent, which spoke to a meager maturity.

"So, we're an experiment?"

"That's my conjecture," Hadrian said. "And when it comes to science, early experiments can be crude and risk prone, absurdly so. Unfortunately for us, it's an organic process, and we've suffered from its nascency."

"Do you think they have designs on Sinister?" Dru said, anxious to hear the scientist's thoughts.

"Honestly?"

Dru nodded.

"I don't think they've thought that far ahead. They may have ideas, but ideas and plans are two different things."

Dru remembered the stories of shadoward expeditions launched by the science institute to scout sites for remote stellar observatories, mountaineers scaling the dark glaciers of far flung peaks in unspeakable cold. An observatory was eventually built, but it never justified the hundreds of deployed survey teams. Astronomy was the excuse, but pure exploration was the impetus. The voyage of L'Estelo Magnus was steeped in religion, but it was hubris, ancient and undeniable, that had brought the

followers of Capricorn to Sinister. The shushers weren't beyond such innate human compulsions.

While Hadrian pumped Milius about the chamber's mechanics and purpose, Dru was drawn to details Milius mentioned in passing. Near a laboratory-like building Milius described a row of cages. Inside the cages were the captured fauna of the Salis Majora, buzzing and scuttling about in futility. Most were rift creatures, tigermites, glitter flies, a pair of salt angels, an emperor wasp —likely the one trapped with them in the Nexus. Milius described a gray lizard which Dru found most pathetic.

"It's not moving."

"Is it dead?" Dru asked.

"I can't tell," Milius replied. "It's thin, malnourished. Sometimes I think I see its eyes shift, or its mouth open…"

"What are they doing with them?"

"Nothing," Milius replied.

"Nothing?"

"Studying them, maybe, but the cages are off by themselves. It's hard to tell if they've water or food. Not sure these 'shushers' would even know what to feed them."

Dru was disturbed by the cages, more than she expected. The fate of such creatures in the wild would've been of no concern. But here, neglected in this faraway place, their plight made Dru

resentful. She grew angry, but choked it back.

“They might be waiting to dissect them or something,” Milius guessed. “It might be part of the process to preserve them. Not sure.”

“Can’t they be quicker? Their ‘magicians’ somehow teleported themselves light years away; you’d think they would’ve mastered simple chemistry, like ether or formaldehyde…”

“You think they're cruel.”

“Maybe —I don’t know. I’ll defer to a ‘cultural misunderstanding’ for now,” Dru scoffed.

At night, sleeping in the cool and comfortable darkness, Dru’s dreams were different from the desert psychedelia. Paranoia manifested as half-awake restlessness. She thought of the creatures in their cages, and wondered what would become of them. Her mind spun contrivances to convince herself the shushers had innocuous intent. Was the implant just a psychological glue, a force for societal cohesion, or was it about control? Its illusions were powerful. The thought that all this was happenstance was unlikely; they had plans.

Lo hadn’t communicated with Ry on Sinister, and Hadrian was adamant the physics of such a communication was impossible, at least as far as he understood things. As such, their hosts hadn’t expected their arrival; the dormitory wasn’t intended for

them. The beds, chairs, and table were too large. The room wasn’t a prison, it was a vacant barracks, housing for those living and working in the chamber beyond. Dru knew their situation was only temporary.

“Dru,” Milius whispered

“What?” she whispered back, barely awake.

“I think they're coming. I saw one of the technicians at the window.”

“Are you sure?”

Milius grew adept at spying on the shushers while feigning sleep. By training himself, he could flip back and forth between either eye, splice the separate realities while keeping his lids open. His brain had rewired itself to correct the dizzying effects. As a result, he could reconnoiter inconspicuously.

“Pretend you’re sleeping,” Milius said.

“Why?”

“You’ll scare them off.”

“How many?”

Dru waited for Milius to say something. The minutes wore on until a hush of air stirred the room. A wedge of light expanded then quickly dimmed, Dru’s implant returning the room back to night mode. She watched the silhouette of a shusher sweep across the room, their arms heavy with containers delivering food and

drink. They moved deliberately, unafraid. But maybe they should have been fearful.

Dru worried about Roman's intentions. Something had shifted in the radioman. He was withdrawn. His talk of revenge had distilled into a quiet intimidating gaze. She didn't know him to be violent, but he was young, unpredictable and occasionally rash. For a moment, The Rip had redeemed itself, but the amputation of his arm and its replacement, no matter how functional and seamless, was a betrayal. Whatever powerlessness had dogged him growing up –orphaned, institutionalized, then a vassal– was amplified. His limb was rotten –there was no saving it– but none of that mattered. Given the option to saw his own arm off with Dru's field knife, Roman would have preferred that to not being given a choice at all. Like a pet or a farm creature, the radioman was operated on without consent. The implant was much the same, Dru supposed –they'd all been unwilling participants– but somehow it wasn't so overt, so extreme.

As the shusher headed back to the door, empty containers in hand, Dru sat up, ignoring Milius's urgings to feign sleep. He was paranoid they would discover his visual glitch and correct their 'mistake'. The alien stopped and looked at Dru. A soft cone of light enveloped them. She studied the shusher. Another

male, he’d a similar complexion, eye color, and facial structure, but with one particular distinct difference, a smile. Short and brief, the facial expression was genuine, his eyes warm, not an uncanny mimic. It was a closed lipped melancholy grin but earnest.

“I didn’t mean to wake you. My apologies. My name is Ky, of the Baloq Ry, I am a technician responsible for the four of you. A glorified custodian in a way, looking for a promotion.” Ky winked. A joke. Dru was stunned. ”I would have made my introduction earlier, but we thought it best to let you acclimatize.”

Dru was at a loss. Ky was speaking New Latin, complete with a localized accent, an accent from the Palatine of Novum Pax —her district. She might as well have been exchanging pleasantries with a neighbor. Gone was Lo’s clunky translator and the tinny static. She assumed Milius was eavesdropping, but she felt no sense of him. Incredulous, she needed a witness.

“My name is Druscilla,” she said in a half-whisper, then introduced her silent and sleeping companions.

“I hope you’re comfortable. I imagine it's much different than what you’re used to.”

“Very different. Where is ‘here’? Where are we?”

“A good question, isn’t it? I’m not sure we really know. We’re

still trying to figure that all out," Ky said, looking out the window at the night jungle and planetary crescent above. "Again, I didn't mean to interrupt your rest. I should be back tomorrow, or the next day, for your fittings."

"Fittings?"

"We measured you for our interface specifications when you arrived. A proper fit check is needed to ensure no rubbing or pinching. It shouldn't be a problem. Our manufacturers are highly precise," Ky explained.

"Ky?"

"Yes?"

"What's to become of us?"

"You'll be returning home."

"Back to Sinister?" Dru clarified.

"Your planet —yes." Ky nodded, smiling in approval.

"When do we go back?"

"Soon," Ky replied. "Goodbye for now."

The door rematerialized then dematerialized as Ky exited. Dru lay waiting for Milius to whisper something. She rolled onto her side, propped herself on her elbow, and looked at him. In the dim light, she saw both of his eyes were closed. By the rhythm of his breathing, he was sound asleep. Something was at play. In no reality would Milius have slept through the shusher's visit.

Dru wondered if she'd imagined everything. Ky's mastery of New Latin, his charm… it defied logic. She lay awake, worried that if she fell back asleep, the encounter would commingle with her dreams and she'd doubt it ever happened.

The rising sun tinted the predawn in yellows and greens. Soon the others were up. Dru detailed her encounter over breakfast. No one said anything, much to Dru's surprise. Roman said little to anyone anymore, overtaken by his despondency. Hadrian seemed most keen –as she expected– but Milius only mentioned he'd grown tired and had drifted off.

"Milius, it was minutes after you noticed him outside. You warned me," Dru said, incredulous. "How could you have just fallen asleep?"

"I don't know, honestly. If I'd been awake, I'd have asked Ky, the shusher you described, more questions; that's for sure. But I just couldn't…"

"–More questions? He was only here for a minute," Dru snapped, offended by Milius's presumption that she'd somehow failed in her parley.

Dru thought about the implant's perception filter, and how the device might be augmenting more than just the five senses. Unlike the clunky translator Lo had grown frustrated with, maybe all interaction was automatic now, contextualized by pure

emotion and nuance. The implant, having crossed her synaptic wires, transformed Ky's 'shushing' and awkward expressions into something familiar. She was adamant the meeting had occurred but wasn't sure 'how' it occurred. The fact that Ky told her they'd be going back home, she took as intended.

"So, they're just keeping us in this pen, then sending us packing like stowaways?" Hadrian scoffed.

Dru shook her head. "Neither. The chamber we're in —they're in — isn't easy to reach, from what Ky described. I don't think it exists."

"Doesn't exist?"

"Are we dead, in limbo, 'As Above, So Below'? Is that it?" Milius quipped, both eyes wide as he took a sip of his bespoke liquid.

"Nothing metaphysical. What I meant to say is that this place may exist outside of our shared universe," Dru said.

The comment was more of an intuitive suspicion than anything mathematical; she wasn't a scientist. She would leave such esoteric exercises to Hadrian. The scientist's eyebrows perked up.

"A perturbation of spacetime," Hadrian added. "Interesting idea, Druscilla. A multitude of space-time instances collapsing and expanding simultaneously, or a single state duplicated ad-

infinitum. Time and space could be meaningless here. Is that what you're thinking?" Hadrian said.

"I don't know what I'm thinking, it's what I'm feeling," Dru said.

Roman stood up quickly, knocking his chair onto the floor. He had a look of contempt for Hadrian. His mouth opened as if to speak, but he walked away, kneading the forearm of his alleged artificial limb.

"What's got into him?" Hadrian asked.

"Don't take it personally," Milius said, eating his mystery porridge. "This mixed up place has gotten to him, and the whole 'arm thing'… I should have never mentioned it. We'd have been better off."

Hadrian carried on talking to himself. Dru ignored him as she stared into the lush moonscape. As her mind drifted, she realized the intent of the synthetic view. The window was an elaborate wall clock, synched to circadian time. It provided an anchor of normality in the chamber's limbo. But that 'normality' —time linked to the shade of the sky— was alien, intended solely for the shushers. Dru remembered Lo's brief fugues, his preternatural wakefulness. If the shushers didn't need to sleep, what was all this for? What did they draw from it?

"Ky said we're going home," Dru mentioned as the others

wandered away from the table.

"And where is that, exactly?" Milius asked.

"Where is what? —what do you mean?" she replied, confused.

"Back to the Salis Majora? Not really doing us a favor, are they? I'd rather stay here, holding tight in this… netherworld," Milius said, as he sat down at the edge of a bed.

"Ky mentioned something about equipping us," Dru said. "He made mention about coming back to 'fit' us, 'outfit' us for the journey home."

"Well enough, but getting back to Sinister is another process, a process I don't have any confidence in. This 'probability transfer function' governs the state of our physical beings during the travel event. Lo's friend Li looked like he'd been slow cooked in a reactor before Ludoviko shot him, poisoned by an incomplete transition."

"—Poisoned, an interesting way of putting it, poisoned by a 'bad calculation'," Milius said.

"But we came through The Nexus just fine. I don't understand," Dru said.

"Reciprocity, symmetric, such things are not universal when talking about the temporal solution states of functional operators. Time flows in one direction, as does chaos," Hadrian explained.

“An ‘operator’?... what do you mean?”

“The ‘probability transfer function’ —as Lo phrased it— is a functional ‘operator’, translating the system states that are our corporeal selves,” Hadrian explained.

Dru, her head full of the arcane she’d little hope of digesting, got up and wandered over to her bed for a nap.

They spent the day much as they’d done before, resting, thinking, speculating on the nuances of the shusher’s world and their reliance on the implant to condition it. Instead of the pristine view of Ry, Dru envisioned an industrial hellscape thick with haze and smoke. With such technology, the ease of altering perception to mute the dismal and depressing would be tempting. Illusion would be the norm. The talent for blinding oneself to that which is better ignored was very human. Amplifying the effect seemed obvious.

At sundown, Roman shouted in frustration. He sat at the table, facing the window. Dru got up and ran over to him. He was performing an experiment, one of obvious desperation. He’d woven a thin rope from strips he’d torn from his clothes. He’d tied a tourniquet around the left arm and was using an eating utensil to twist and tighten it. His forearm was a pale gray.

“Roman!” Dru shouted. “What are you doing?”

Tears streamed down his cheek. “No matter how many times and

for how long… nothing happens," he wept. "No tingling. No numbness. Nothing."

"Why would you do that?"

"Milius is right!"

Dru got him away from the table and convinced him to go lay down. Milius stood back, arms crossed and shaking his head in pity. Hadrian looked on in shock, a part of him seemingly unaware how much the whole 'arm business' had affected the radioman. Roman's reality had broken, where for the others it merely shifted. Dru's fear of Roman's increasing unpredictability spiked her anxiety. A psychotic break was the last thing any of them needed.

Ky arrived the next morning. He brought four environmental suits on a mobile rack. While a close match to Lo's unit, these were customized to their proportions. She saw hers on the end, tall, narrow in the shoulders and accommodating in the hips and chest. Each was equipped with head gear and a retractable helmet. All had the requisite three-fingered gauntlets. The suit's internal reactors filled the dormitory with a distinctive hum as the power plants idled the suits' mobility and climate systems.

"Please disrobe, and I'll show you how to open and reseal the suit mechanism," Ky said in his impeccable New Latin.

“Why are you sending us back to Sinister?”

“To accompany our emissaries. We are sending a diplomatic detattachment to discuss an embassy post.”

“You want us to be your guides?”

“Yes,” Ky nodded. ”It’s not your planet’s wilderness we’re concerned with; we’ve that sorted,” he said, gesturing to the suits. “But we need a translator, a local person to liaison with your government officials.”

“I… I don’t understand. Why do you need a translator? You speak impeccable New Latin?” Dru said, confused.

Ky grinned knowingly. “You’re able to understand us, but we are not speaking the same language. Our conversation is pantomime.”

“I don’t understand,” Dru said, but she did understand in a way. The implant was sorting out the babble on-the-fly by some cognitive trickery beyond their understanding.

Hadrian looked at Dru bewildered. She shrugged. Milius just stared at Ky, both eyes wide as if in a trance.

“Sir?” Hadrian interjected. “Where are we now? What is this place?”

Ky looked out the window and smiled. “An arboretum, close to the city of Montec Zy, the old capital. It’s beautiful, isn’t it?”

Dru shook her head. “We’ve been looking at it for days. We don’t think it’s real.”

“Oh?” Ky said, faking surprise. “Why not?”

“Artifacts in the image, ‘glitches’ we call them,” Dru lied, eyes batting at Milius. “Sometimes we see a pixel flash, leaves scrambled in a static hiccup.”

Ky nodded and smiled. “A nice view none-the-less. Soothing, I think,” he replied, being cagey.

“Where are we? …really?”

“We’re not sure, like I said,” Ky admitted. “One of the matter voids deep below the casting towers at the surface. We're too far down in Ry’s mantle to pinpoint or map the voids. But we do know we’re close to the optimum.”

“The optimum?”

“The extraction point of zero entropy, a minimum in the probability transfer function’s topography. Your arrival point.”

“The Nexus.”

“It’s the prime egress –the easiest– but there are less probable routes,” Ky paused. “On Ry, we’ve coupled to the optimum using displacement crawlers. From the surface, we navigate the function’s ever-shifting labyrinth down to this point. The journey takes days, if not weeks. It’s quite unpleasant.”

The chamber –or matter void– did in fact exist; Dru was wrong about that. But its exact location was unknown. Within The Rip's mirror, it was an asymmetrical complement, a vast expanse of empty bubbles inverted light years and projected by a 'casting towers', some mechanism atop the moon's surface. On Sinister existed a sphere that complimented the chamber void. She remembered the sphere she'd held in her fist, and its slight tug as it sought equilibrium. It could have been this very chamber, transposed from one world to another in a trick of simultaneity and space-time.

Ky hurried them to try on their suits. Everyone undressed as the shusher instructed them on how to operate the exotic kits. Dru couldn't help but notice her companions, emaciated and withering. The implant altered perception for the better, but it had done them no favors. Sinister's sun left its mark. Their skin was tight and leathery. Milius and Hadrian –older by almost two decades– with their knobby knees, visible ribs, hunched backs, and tented hip bones, looked elderly. Everyone's frailty took her by surprise, leaving her to wonder how they'd survived the Salis Majora at all.

They went about clambering into the suits as per Ky's instruction. Once inside, he pressed a large square button on each of their gauntlets' controls. She felt the automated suit

come to life, its whir of subsystems ramping up. It synched around her. The fit was tight but comfortable and its temperature was cool and steady, if not soothing.

"You shouldn't feel the impact of heat with the suit properly functioning. We've gone through Lo's datalogs, and while there were some minor entropy issues, it was stable and comfortable."

The suit's weight was significant, but movement —while natural and uninhibited— was amplified and enabled by muscle prosthetics. Reaction time was instantaneous and without lag, the suit acting like a biomechanical sheath integrated into their nervous system. Ky let them practice moving about, then showed them the subtleties of the water system before demonstrating the latch release.

Ky was to return in the morning to continue their training. The chamber's shusher mathematicians had modeled a viable transport window —whatever that meant— and they were to return in three days. Not enough time to visit Ry proper, Dru reasoned, not that being a 'tourist' was ever a possibility. They used a linked network of 'displacement crawlers' to navigate the void archipelago from above. It required 'calculations' to find routes through the mantle. As such, Dru had little appreciation for what it took to reach the Nexus antechamber from Ry's surface. A subterranean analog of their journey across the Salis

Majora, the chamber was in a sense a midway point between two human worlds.

When Ky left –and the suits with him– Dru approached Milius and asked about the encounter, having noticed his focused, almost hypnotic gaze.

"You were observing him, weren't you?"

Milius nodded.

"What did you see?"

"After our arrival, with our predicament as it is, I believed I could make peace with my new 'double-vision'. But not when it comes to them," he said, gesturing at the window, and the shushers outside only he could see.

"What do you mean?

"Like Lo, Ky's expressions –his emotions– were removed when I switched over to my left eye. He was like a doll, or an animated corpse. His warm facade was just that: facade. And of course it goes without saying, his lips weren't synced, speaking his 'shusher' language."

Dru expected as much, but what haunted her more wasn't confirmation of the ruse, but how they may appear to the shushers unfiltered. Maybe they were the human bugs, dead lifeless eyes with the forced archaic mannerisms of a simulacrum. Maybe they were the laconic puppets who faked

smiles. Who were they to them? Dru’s lower abdomen tightened as cold sweat swelled on her neck. Then, as if by suggestion, she was asleep.

CHAPTER TWENTY ONE: THE LAKE

Ky instructed them on the proper use of the environmental suits. The gauntlet was the suit’s controls. Its buttons projected a holographic menu in midair. Integrated with the implant, everyone saw their own displays and none other. Menus for status, navigation, vitals, and communication were obvious, but other screens were blank. While Ky made no mention of it, Dru guessed its combat mode had been disabled. She noticed Roman clenching his fist like he’d done before, but in frustration. The built-in weapon no longer worked. Dru was relieved. An armed Roman was a whole other headache.

All the displays were in New Latin, free of ambiguity or misspelling. The implant had magically translated everything.

Dru was awestruck. With the time left, they sorted the suits, asked Ky questions, and got used to operating the survival hardware. In the morning, they were to depart.

Their return would be unceremonious. No formal send off. Dru expected another visit from the shushers –a diplomatic corps at least– but Ky was Ry's only interlocutor. Milius saw officials staring at them through the window, but none bothered to introduce themselves. Hadrian guessed it was for quarantine, but Ky's presence contradicted the notion. Dru would've expected anthropologists, psychologists, naturalists or historians to interview them. None showed. The chamber's isolation no doubt barred the casual academic from visiting, but still…

Ky told them they were to split-up in order to limit payload capacity. Dru felt anxious. The prospect of disbanding cast a pall, downcast eyes hung on sullen faces. Hadrian and Roman were to make the crossing first, and Dru and Milius would follow. The reason wasn't clear, and they'd no information to argue its logic. Once through, they were to reunite via internal navigation –the Nexus compass– using the suits' wireless transponders. Ky was to escort Hadrian and Roman, while an unnamed shusher was to join Dru and Milius.

They spent their last night much as they had, keeping to themselves. Dru watched Roman, whose shift in demeanor was

concerning. He was fragile, his constitution low. She tried to engage him, but shoulder shrugs and the odd word were his only replies. Hadrian, having been paired with the troubled radioman, seemed on edge about the prospect.

“I’m worried about you, Roman,” she said, sitting next to him on his bed.

“Don’t be.”

“I understand why you hate them. But your arm, with the implant, they ‘fixed’ it the only way they knew how. They did try to do the right thing in the end. I know it’s hard to accept. The method however… let’s just say it was a ‘cultural miscommunication’,” Dru said.

“Cy, the machine planet…” Roman pointed at the gibbous world looming over the jungled. “Have you wondered why it's been relegated to their automata?”

Dru shook her head.

“The planet is poisoned.”

“Ky mentioned it,” Dru replied, confused.

“And there’s nothing they can do that’ll make it livable, no antidotes, vaccinations, gene-splicing, or sophisticated medicines. Nothing can protect them from what’s down there. It’s hopeless.”

“Why?”

"High levels of natural radiation, heavy nuclides fissioning in its crust, the stuff that kills multicellular life, except maybe a few hardy plants and tiny quick-lived creatures."

"How do you know all this? Hadrian?"

Roman shook his head. "Cy isn't its original name, it's Dexter Domum, the planet surveyed by the custodial crew of L'Estelo Magnus. Before Sinister."

Dru remembered the story, right before Hadrian had collapsed. She opened her mouth to speak, ready to contradict the radioman's theory, but she had no counterargument. The planet L'Estelo Magnus had sailed past a millennium prior, the shushers now called home. But not the planet itself, its moon. Were the Capricorn pilots unaware? Maybe some unforeseen circumstance – some sensor flaw– ignored the prospect. But such was the stuff of ancient ship logs.

"The moon…" she said. "They didn't know. How strange. They were only looking at the planets."

Roman nodded. "At interstellar speeds, the probe's orbital trajectory and sensor uplink lost fidelity. Proper alignment must have made observations challenging, even impossible. These shushers have centuries on us, and we're fully at their mercy. They're dangerous, even if they're ambivalent. Be wary."

"They could have gone anywhere, Tero –the homeworld, Anywhere.

Why did they seek us out? ”

Roman shrugged. “They’re keeping a lot from us. I have a hunch their history is complicated. They might have already been to ‘Tero’. But they’re not telling us any of that. They think we’re lesser, but they’re smart enough to know we’re not dumb.”

“What’s in it for them? ”

“Myths, legends, the occult, ‘lost civilizations’ –all that– wrapped up in old rumors, that’s my guess,” Roman said, looking out at the virtual nightscape.

“Legends of forgotten hulks, lost tribes, cities of ice and salt… we’re a bit the same, despite the light years.”

“They must be disappointed. No unearthed grandeur, just an outpost in an abandoned rift, thousands of kilometers into the heat, no survivors.” Roman smirked. “But who knows. Maybe they see what they want to see with that implant of theirs.”

“The rift felt like home. I was sorry to leave it.”

Roman shrugged his shoulders, ambivalent.

“The shushers are eugenicists, you know. Ky, Lo, that corpse Li… they’re all genetically monolithic. Milius says it's much the same with the shushers he’s studied milling about in the chamber. They’re like Vespera’s genetic Harmony Initiative –our Progress Ministry– but worse. No women either, at least none that Milius has noticed. Maybe they cull them.”

“Roman, stop. We don’t know that,” Dru said, attempting a counter-argument.

“Their whole world is a charterhouse, no doubt, some austere work clan. Perfectly engineered austerity. These implants control them, numb perception, and dull sensibilities.”

“But your arm?”

Roman shook his head. “The pain, my arm –the wound– was part of me. The mutilation, a reminder. If they can remove that kind of pain, they can remove anything. And I’m not just talking about physical pain.”

“Why’s that bad?”

“We are our wounds. What did you think about when your tinnitus –the ringing in your ears– gets bad? What did it remind you of?”

“My sister and I sparring savate, a bad day when we went at each other like animals. The kick knocked me onto my back. My head hit the ground. I don’t even remember why we were mad. When I came to, I remembered her face and the ringing; I’d never seen her so scared, except that moment of the attack.”

“–And now your ringing is gone.”

#

Beyond the dormitory, the chamber was transformed. Expecting the crowded factory, they were instead greeted to a clean,

bright, nearly sterile space devoid of mechanical confusion. The most startling change was the chamber walls themselves. The view from their dormitory remained, a hemispherical sky, complete with a sunrise, stars, and projected clouds. Only a ghostly hint of the chamber walls' remained. The outdoor sensation was so complete, Dru swore she felt a breeze and a droplet on her cheek. Kitted in their suits, Ky led them to the rally point. Less of a crowd than before, a few shusher officials stood next to technicians manning upright consoles. They looked busy, heads down, fingers flying across buttons and toggles to conjure the 'displacement crawler'.

"Are <u>those</u> going with us?" Dru gestured at the large centipede-like robots Milius had described.

"Not yet. Soon perhaps, when we produce more consistency in the process. It will take multiple transfers and post-delivery assembly to rebuild it on the other side."

"<u>Consistency</u>?"

"If each component accumulates too much entropic noise, each segment won't be compatible."

"And it will malfunction."

"Yes."

Less than one percent of the spiders had returned. But fifty percent of their human travelers had managed to make it home, a

fifty-fold improvement. But the odds remained dismal. The risk churned Dru's stomach. The shushers were going forward with their plans, regardless; they'd invested too much. The infrastructure alone –the chamber, the hardware, the personnel– was impressive. The shushers' had internalized the risk. The 'probability transfer function' experiment could absorb misfire after misfire. Dru and her companions, however, could not.

"Milius, Dru, I'd like to re-introduce you to your escort," Ky said, gesturing to an agent kitted out in a bone white suit, accented by black malleable joints.

"Lo?" Dru said, unsure. "I… –we didn't recognize you."

"Samath Lo has volunteered to return. Our emissary designate failed to arrive from the surface. Such accidents happen. And Lo, while not a diplomat, was willing. And since you already have a rapport…" Ky said.

"Druscilla, I'm pleased to see you again," Lo said in New Latin, his deep baritone uncorrupted by the clutter of the glitchy translator.

Assuming 'no rapport' described one's relationships with things like bugs or plants, Lo and Dru did in fact have a 'rapport'. She extended her hand, which he shook. Lo's metamorphosis was fantastical. She knew it was an illusion –the implant's doing– but she was mystified. The wireless linkage to

each other's linguistic cortices carried the raw data –filtered from any cultural clutter– which was then processed in real time.

“Lo. You remember Milius,” Dru said.

Milus shook Lo’s hand then turned to Ky. “You said the emissaries were lost? How?”

“Navigation is routine, however the displacement crawlers can suffer misalignments while delivering payloads. Calibrations are corrupted and the inter-chamber routing from the surface fails. And…” Ky made a face.

“And?”

“–Let’s move on and discuss the journey at hand.” Ky forced a smile even the implant couldn’t smooth.

Traveling to Sinister was dangerous, but the journey down to the Nexus antechamber was also unsafe. Dru imagined pallets of cargo, accompanied by would-be diplomats, stranded in one of the probability transfer function’s oubliettes. Whether rescue was possible was a mystery. Like any hermetic pocket, oxygen would deplete, and the trapped would suffocate. But if air weren’t a problem, one would still die of dehydration, or if stranded even longer, starvation.

Ky stood next to three collapsed spiders, tucked up into their cylinders. The units were bulkier than the simple probes from

before. Technicians continued to fiddle about, dialing in the displacement crawler for optimum insertion. Ky mentioned ‘casting towers’ and ‘critical mass reactors’ and how relativistic equilibrium was required to bridge Sinister. Hadrian concentrated on Ky’s esoteric explanation, trying to understand it. Soon pixelated fluid welled around them and formed an undulating gondola. Roman looked at Dru. He sat down as the seat self-assembled to greet him, his eyes cold with resentment and despondency. Then like water, Hadrian, Roman, and Ky fell into the floor and disappeared.

Dru, Milius, and Lo were ushered to the transit point. Minutes passed as they waited for the gateway to clear. A deep hum numbed their legs. The hum changed pitch until it reached a crescendo, culminating into a crack that jolted the chamber floor. Technicians monitoring an orchestra of unseen holographic displays nodded in unison. The transit of Roman, Hadrian and Ky was complete. Dru regretted not saying goodbye, but she’d been assured they’d be quickly reunited.

The floor again conjured its elevator. They sat down like the others and let the slosh of granular matter swallow them whole. Dru closed her eyes and kept them closed. The queasy vertigo was bad enough without the dazzle of a shifting biomechanical tablea.

“Our mathematicians gave assurances the computational engines had been refined. We should expect minimal entropy burden. They found stable solutions in the inversion routines. No chaotic determinants,” Lo explained, parroting an explanation he most certainly didn't grasp.

“What became of the emissary?” Milius asked.

”A completely different problem. An artifact in the dynamic mapping routines,” Lo replied. “A pulse collapsed. We’re not sure.”

Eyes shut, Dru felt the air change. She opened them wide and was surrounded again by The Nexus chamber, or an instance of. Its volume was similar. The hum began and a dazzle pulsed over the wall in an amoeba splash of honeycomb. Like disembodied hands, the solid pixels set them down then absorbed back into the ceiling. Lo fiddled with his gauntlet, generating a holographic display for all to see. Its cryptic symbols and icons confused Dru, a countdown maybe. She heard the staticy shusher voices in her ear, a prelude to the chamber’s throbs of deafening tonal sound. A bright flash, and then a crack, and they were somewhere else. For a moment, Dru hovered in blackness. A few flicks, and tiny built-in lamps brightened along the trim of her suit and fingertips. Dru waved her hand about to feel the space. Another spherical chamber, but

drastically shrunk. They were shoulder-to-shoulder with the folded forms of the spider robots.

“We’re here,” Lo said calmly.

“Where?”

He extended his arm to the wall and pressed. Solid at first, it soon swallowed his hand like a pool of mercury. Up to his elbow, it tugged at him. Dru and Milius followed and pushed into the membrane, feeling it give way like a reactive ooze.

“But the spiders…” Dru said.

“They’ll activate…” Lo started, his face half-immersed along with most of his body. “And they will follow us…” Lo said, completing his sentence mouthless. Dru remembered what Ky had told her; the act of talking was pantomime. The implant allowed them to converse with raw thought, processed and conditioned for transmission.

Another push and they toppled onto each other. Like an allergic reaction, Dru’s eyes itched and she’d a runny nose along with a sore throat. Her tinnitus was back and acute, nearly deafening, until the implant eventually quelched the ring. She coughed phlegm and felt prickly pain in her chest like bronchitis. Disoriented, she tried to stand. Her eyes were blurred and tear-filled, and her knees and hips hurt with arthritic pain. When she opened her mouth to speak, the sting of

canker sores gave her pause. A few teeth wiggled and ached.

“Blind,” Milius croaked.

“What?”

“Some of it is temporary. Give it a few minutes,” Lo said, his deep baritone tempered by a raspy hiss. “It’s the entropy burden.”

Dru fumbled to reclaim sense. She rubbed her eyes and looked around. The sphere from which they emerged hovered just above Salis Majora’s salt pan. Back on Sinister, but somewhere different, somewhere new. Underfoot was salt crust, but it creaked and cracked as she stood and shifted her weight. Rainbow flashes, like floaters in her eyes, popped in her periphery. The sparks were coming from deep below, underneath the crust in the salt brine.

“Careful where you walk,” she said. “This is a lake. Try not to punch through, the crust is thin. Step carefully.”

“The suits are waterproof,” Lo said, unaware of the true danger.

“It’s not the saline, it’s the electricity. I can see the corona deep down,” Dru explained.

The spiders unfolded from their chrysalis and stood on pointed feet, wobbling into equilibrium. Beta models of the original probes, these were outfitted with saddles. Dru rubbed her eyes

and looked at Milius. A rash stretched from one hand, along his arm, under his suit, past his neckline, over his jaw and up to his left ear. His left eye had clouded over into a solid milky white. The ‘entropy burden’ had finally relieved him of his oculus sinister, mercifully so. Just hints of light and shadow were all that remained. Lo was much as he was, and if he suffered, he kept it discrete. Dru noticed more graying in his hair and patchy areas of his scalp. Despite the suit's biomechanical assist, he dragged his right foot, subtle but not unnoticeable.

“Where are we?” Milius wondered.

“Thirty four kilometers away from Ky and your comrades,” Lo said, checking his navigation system. “Unfortunately, I’m unable to make contact with them. We’re close enough to locate their beacon, but something’s not right.”

“The electrical discharge,” Dru said, tapping her three-toed boot on the smooth lake crust. “Lots of voltage below. Interference.”

“Let’s get moving,” Lo said.

The three robots flattened to the ground. Dru and Milius followed Lo’s lead and mounted the machines like steeds. The saddles were comfortable, conforming to the subtleties of Dru’s lower half. They followed Lo, guided by the specifics of his

direction finder. Dru tried toggling the navigation menu on her console, but became frustrated. The words were in New Latin, but they made no sense as put together. Babble. The software had malfunctioned.

The sun was high. The heat from the desert distorted the perfection of The Rip's intermingled spheres. With the suit, Dru was insulated from the Salis Majora's extremes. The desert was nothing anymore, just scenery –boring scenery– passing by as she relaxed, feeling the cool within the suit's environmental jacket. She felt like a tourist. Thirsty, she drank from a retractable hose, water with a temperature close to ice. Hungry, she opened a pouch from one of the suit's built-in satchels, the bland paste now transformed into a savory stew. The mind-cleansing purification of her prior suffering was distant. Her luxury made her feel guilty. Admonishing such feelings, she dismissed them. Instead, she indulged the Salis Majora's bleak serenity.

Milius noticed fewer spheres and made mention. Open expanses were more frequent and the sphere 'forests' less. Instead, The Rip became patchy island archipelagos. Scrolling through the suit's endless menu system, Dru stumbled into its vision augmentation tool. Enhancing and zooming in the shadoward horizon, she looked for Sinister's second moon Luna Secunda,

marking the Tajigo Meridian. They were still too far sunward, the visible body still below the horizon.

The spiders formed a caravan, lumbering on, guided by their soft logic. Lo said little. But when asked a question, he replied in a conversational manner. As such, Dru took advantage. Milius was off in his own world and trailed behind, a passive closed-lipped smile of someone unconcerned. He'd finally been relieved of his left eye's visual duties, both as a seer and a truth-teller. Now he was no longer ancillary, unburdened at last.

"Do you have children, Lo?" Dru asked, uninhibited; the implant had taken care of that.

"They don't tell us those things," he explained.

"Do you have families?"

Low was silent, but Dru knew he wasn't ignoring her, he was thinking about the question.

"Our inference engines aggregate qualities into groups you would call families, as you would understand it," Lo replied.

"How did you know about Sinister? You knew about us before you arrived. You knew we spoke Esperanto."

"You were the first."

"The first… what?"

"To leave Tero," Lo replied. "And we were the last."

“Others left? Where did they go?”

“Like your ancestors, they traveled beyond the outer planets. Tens of ships, maybe a hundred, if not more. But…”

At the time of Planetfall, Sinister’s pioneers were decoupled from humanity’s main sequence. The fate of Tero was a mystery and always had been. Their ability to communicate with the homeworld was no longer possible. But Lo’s ancestors left Tero three centuries after L’Estelo Magnus, so he explained, carried by a starship equipped with powerful engines. In stasis, Sinister’s future inhabitants were relics, the L’Estelo Magnus an antique. Advancements on the homeworld had accelerated, and future starships benefited.

Lo told her tales of deep space horror. Unlike L’Estelo Magnus’s misaligned antennas and lost connection, successive outbound ships maintained link. Many suffered mechanical faults that led to slow deaths with crews and passengers prematurely awoken and left to fend for themselves. Some resorted to cannibalism. Others were euthanized after on-board reactor failures, quietly and coldly. Onboard computers, trained for ruthless triage, attempted to manage impossibly failed voyages. To preserve power, some shut off the life-support of the less needed, while maintaining a core of capable crew. A reasonable triage. However some computers —or inference engines— acted in

atypical, anomalous, and at times, absurd ways.

Lo described a wayward colony ship that had lost its guidance propellant from a runaway leak. It attempted to harvest fuel from its onboard biomass in a mad electrolysis experiment. The biomass, unfortunately, happened to be the decaying organic matter created by improvised algae vats, bioreactors fueled by the bodies of entire passenger blocks. Another ship, whose colony awoke prematurely due to a coolant depressurization, attempted a mass chemical lobotomy in-fugue to induce a more efficient vegetative state, a hopeless pseudo hibernation. Botched attempts to slow their metabolism failed and the centuries-long voyage withered from attrition.

The ones that made it to their destinations were marooned in star systems with nothing more than gas giants, ice planets, and airless rocks with only a hint of gravity. Astronomical reconnaissance had failed them. Lo mentioned that the ‘collapse’ on Tero was acute. The nature of the crisis was vague. Lo wasn’t sure the Baloq Ry’s starship was the last, but the abrupt end of Tero communiques didn’t bode well. And like the many before it, Ry’s colonyship also suffered malfunctions.

The starship’s cooling towers grew unstable and had to be jettisoned. The thermal load was maintainable for a time, but a mysterious power draw caused hibernation blocks to fail one

after another. Sacrifices were made to an extreme.

“Only two hundred remained when we entered Cy’s orbit. Our population was genetically marginal. To naturally rebuild the population was risky.”

“How did you survive?”

“The inference engines took over, computing genetic combinations hundreds of generations into the future. We are selected for chromosomal pairings. Stable now, but recessive genetics remain. We are grouped by necessity.”

Roman had been right about the sushers; they were eugenicists, but not ideologically so. It’d been a survival tactic, a means to maintain their colony. But it’d obviously become a habit. Novum Pax’s propagandists used much the same logic to enforce their version of population management —The Harmony Initiative— but counterexamples persisted and proved the genetic ministry false. Dru knew it wouldn’t make any difference to Roman. He’d made his mind up about Ry and the shushers.

“How many are you now?”

“The Baloq Ry are twenty three million.”

“From just two hundred?”

Lo nodded.

“And your robots? How many?”

“We don’t count the Meka Cy.”

The dominance of machines in Lo's world made sense now. Cy was the machine planet, the forbidden poisonous world —Dexter Domum, if Roman's theory was correct— and the moon Ry, its human companion. Maybe the machines weren't slaves but equal partners, the benign administrators that orchestrated the shusher's day-to-day lives. The thought intrigued Dru: a hybrid state, free of survival burden.

Dru thought about the other lost hulks of the L'Estelo Magnus. Smashed into a moon, cash-landed and buried in ice shadoward, flung into the sun, all tragedies —yes— but really nothing in comparison to Lo's harrowing stories of interstellar woe. Sinister's planetfall was a miracle. With nothing to compare it to, she'd never thought about the odds. The inconceivable risk the Capricorn pilots took to gently set them down on Sinister was nothing less than sorcery.

By luck and circumstance, their voyage had inspired others on Tero. But the centuries of progress failed them. L'Estelo Magnus had set a precedent. The religious outcasts had evolved into a myth, ancient sailors vanished over the celestial horizon. Their disappearance was an inspiration, not a warning. But desperation was the handmaiden of bravery. And as the homeworld experienced 'collapse' the events leading to mass exodus was ultimately unknown.

“So you think Sinister is lucky?”

“A statistical anomaly or something else,” Lo paused. “Something extraordinary.”

“Something extraordinary? I don’t understand.”

“A foreign knowledge bestowed but not learned. An internal guidance. Deliverance. Engineering is a mix of artform and alchemy, driven by an exhausting manifold of approach. As such, engineering is at the mercy of an almost infinite variable set.”

“Manna from heaven, then? That’s rather far-fetched,” Dru said, stupefied.

“We just don’t know. It could be a possibility,” Lo said, jogging his spider ahead.

Dru hung back and waited for Milius to catch up. Lo’s presumptions angered her. What did he know about her ancestors? She stared off at the desert mirages, mesmerized, letting the jostle of the mechanical arachnid focus her mind. A ‘foreign knowledge’ that was ‘bestowed’ not earned alluded to the metaphysical, a belief that the followers of Capricorn were guided by a deity, not by the mettle of human navigators and engineers. Occult nonsense. Baphomet, be damned.

“What were you two talking about?” Milius asked, his spider drifting over next to hers.

“The shushers think we’re still a bunch of black thaumaturges,

zealots, all that," Dru said, her face sour.

"Planetfall, before the Schism? How could he possibly know? They never asked us anything about Sinister. They never bothered," Milius said, incredulous.

"They made up their minds about us long ago. Time just exasperates the fiction, the lore, prophecy, all that. And you and I aren't going to change Lo's mind, or Ky's mind, or any of the rest of the… the … Baloq Ry –or whatever they call themselves."

"So, we're going to let them go on thinking it was by the hand of Baphomet himself that intervened on our behalf? They would have to know better. They know that's all codswallop," Milius argued. "I think you misunderstood him."

"Maybe."

Dru had lost track of time. With no sleep, wakes were meaningless. With food and water plentiful, they'd no need to camp. The implant controlled her circadian rhythms. Sleep was possible –they'd slept well back on Ry– but a survival algorithm governed her physiology, modifying her neurons and metabolism by some sophisticated interface. Milius complained of being too cold even, a neuropathy in his extremities. Malaise was commingled with the after-affects of 'entropy injury', the extent of which they couldn't diagnose.

The Rip became a sparse ‘savannah’ marked by wide expanses of smooth salt crust. Vast shallow pools of open brine formed a collection of interlocking lakes. Cracks and fractures allowed for the seeping of saline to percolate. Thick mirage distorted the lake, breaking it into a stratified column of shimmer. Through the wavering refraction, Dru noticed objects and shapes atypical of the black euclidean geometry. Lo slowed, head panning about. Color —odd dashes of it— surrounded them. Dru toggled her focus and zoomed in. The amorphous blobs were people, long dead and scattered about.

“What is this?”

“It’s the lake,” Dru replied.

“What lake?”

“Delfino and Ludoviko’s lake.”

CHAPTER TWENTY TWO: THE LEFT ARM OF ROMAN

Dru easily found the rifle, the glassy shallows betraying any unintended camouflage. She dismounted her spider and inspected the weapon. Corroded, its firing mechanism and magazine looked intact. She reached down to pick it up but heard Lo tell her to stop. He'd raised his right arm, hand flexed, gauntlet's plasma beam at the ready. Dru did what she was told. If she'd learned anything, it was not to surprise a shusher. Lo remained jittery, and Dru was uncertain what could trigger him. They'd a mutual understanding, but no trust.

"No need for that Lo," Dru said. "I'm a weapons officer. I just wanted to inspect it. It's broken; I'm almost certain."

Lo nodded and lowered his arm. Dru picked up the gun again, a heavy game rifle and high caliber. Tigan made, it had features

of specific design and manufacture. While most Vespans were right-handed, Tigans were predominantly left-handed. And as it was, the rifle had a scope, bolt, and stock specific to their asymmetry. Two rounds remained in the magazine, but its chamber was warped from misfire.

"It's damaged," Dru declared. "Useless."

"Sitting in that salty muck, it seems like a forgone conclusion," Milius said.

"This one jammed. These bigger rifles can fire semi-automatically, but can't keep up. Vespan designs are more elegant. Someone was trying to get off a lot of shots very quickly."

Dru looked about. The Tigans dispute had devolved into an explosion of violence. The scene at the lake was savage and bloody, the atrocity's aftermath a monument to barbarity. Delfino and Ludoviko had made a mess of their companions. With such volatile deviants, Dru was surprised it hadn't happened earlier. In Delfino's attempt to charm Druscilla —even in his last minutes— he'd held back from admitting what had actually transpired. Delirious and half-alive, he'd most likely convinced himself such a massacre was perhaps Ludoviko's doing, and not his own.

The three went to inspect the dead. The lake was electrically

active –that was true– but its discharge was too deep, just flashes and rumbling, nothing at the surface. A few Tigans had broken through the crust –that was no lie– but absent were the red welts and scorch marks of high voltage wounds. Instead, the bleached bodies were peppered by swollen craters of pink viscera and bone fragments. Dru counted ten corpses along with their gear.

Ludoviko was the likely executioner. Not to forgive Delfino, but the pot-shot Ludoviko had taken at Milius was honed and precise; Dru noticed such things. From Milius's account, he'd been a hundred meters out when he fired and hit his left eye. Dru was impressed; the psychopath –and no-doubt assassin– with his cold precision and control, was a deft sharpshooter. But something had gone wrong. Either berserk or manic, Ludiviko had unloaded in rapidfire. Lo studied the dead. He poked and prodded the bullet wounds, manipulated their heads so he could gaze into their clouded leathery eyes. He found the massacre a puzzle. Like some forensic anthropologist, he was doing research.

"What's he up to?" Milius wondered.

"I don't know. But if the implant helps me read him any better, I'd say he's mesmerized by all this… carnage,' Dru said, watching Lo wander from body to body.

It was obvious 'what' happened, but not 'why'. With this lot

of Tigan criminals, it could've been anything. Felons weren't known for their discipline. Dwindling supplies, an expedition gone astray, mutiny, bad water, madness, revenge, or a combination… —whatever the reason, Delfino hadn't given details. Instead he painted the Tigan mission's failure with broad strokes. Originally put off by Delfino's story, Dru had ignored his retelling. Maybe if she'd bothered to pay attention to Delfino —asked questions maybe— she could've inferred more. But back at the oasis, Dru had no energy for skepticism; it was easier to ignore the gut churning and anxiety-inducing story of another doomed expedition. Manipulative and plotting, they might've conspired to ambush their mates, perhaps for no other reason than to scavenge. Wanton predation. Ludoviko and Delfino were convicted killers afterall, and Tigan ones at that.

"They really had a go at each other."

"Delfino and I had a conversation. He admitted to me the Tigan mission was a press-gang of convicts, murderers, and rapists. Dead-enders. Delfino killed a woman back in Urbo, and he was in prison for murder," Dru admitted. "I don't know who in Urbo thought conscripting this crew was a good idea. If they would have succeeded in their mission —obtaining proof of The Nexus— they'd be free men."

"Deflino, a murderer, you say? Interesting," Milius paused,

thinking. “What about Ludoviko?”

“Delfino mentioned he was a professional, probably a paid assassin involved in Domo fratricides. Cold, clinical, it makes sense knowing what we know now.”

“Why didn’t you mention any of this before?”

Dru shrugged. “I figured everyone’s opinion of me was low enough without knowing I’d shared a kiss with a Tigan murderer.”

“You and Delfino? I was unaware.”

Dru nodded, humored by Milius’s obtuseness. “It was before we knew anything about them —I thought you knew.”

She was surprised Roman hadn’t whispered the details to Hadrian or Milius. It seemed like appropriate gossip. However, as Dru discovered, the radioman’s feelings for her were both amorous and resentful. Feelings he kept discreet.

Because the Tigans were felons, guilty of violent crimes, Dru found it easy to dismiss their barbarity. Urbo was a ruthless place, and the Domo system was violent. Her mother’s prejudices had poisoned her daughters’ opinion about their maternal homeland. Its parochial hierarchies never truly emerged from the austerity of Planetfall survivalism. Rumors of blood rituals and sacrifice lingered. But Vespera was founded by Tigans, and despite Novum Pax’s pretension, its vestigial compulsions remained. Dru felt it in her veins, the thin line of civility.

In the aftermath of the attack in the swamp, with the blaming, shouting, and shoving, Dru remembered feeling cornered. Marcus was mutinous; she'd had it with him. Seething, she thought about emptying her pistol into the mapmaker's head, killing the bastard. And when she'd confronted Hadrian right before killing Ludoviko, she remembered how the pistol felt in her hand. By luck, reason had drowned out an impetuous rage, much to the scientist's fortune.

Merciful deaths meted out to Delfino and Ludoviko hadn't made Dru a killer —she'd convinced herself— but the crack of the pistol, seeping blood, wheezy last breaths, and involuntary gurgles, provided a vicarious window. Death was close, so close she remembered it had a smell. Nausea followed, but then she felt nothing. Killing was the act, but its context was another matter.

"Is he taking notes?" Milius said, watching Lo wandering about.

Lo squatted near a half-submerged body. Dru sloshed over to see what had piqued his interest. The crust was starting to thin. A web of cracks expanded under her feet. But Dru's suit adapted. Its three-toed boots expanded unprompted, like a birdfoot to distribute her weight. The saltwater had kept the body buoyant. The victim's hands were frozen claws, grasping for

handholds that didn’t exist. A salt frost clung to his sun-scorched flesh. The bullet had entered his head just under his left eye, and then exited in a cone at the base of his skull. Brine flies had gnawed away his lips into a sculpture of gritting rage. All this wasn’t as intriguing as what lay a few meters away.

Dru picked up the narrow blade, dried blood mixing with the corrosion on its hilt. The dead man had managed a blow before falling through, before Ludoviko had finished him off. The knife was most certainly the weapon used to stab Delfino. The blade was just skinny enough to get in between his ribs. Maybe this was Johano? Drew forgot their names, but Delfino had probably lied about that as well. Wary of Lo, Dru dropped the weapon.

“A blood offering,” Lo said.

Dru was about to reply but paused. Lo might have misspoke. To translate language, the implant relied on intent. Therefore, she had to assume Lo meant what he said. An occult myth of the Capricorn sect, such rumors remained. But Lo was an alien, unaware of Sinister’s history, unless their reputations had preceded them.

“They were murdered, Lo, slain.”

“Why?”

Dru shrugged. “These men were convicts, murderers, violent

men.”

“Was it a battle?”

Dru shook her head. “No. These men were killed by two agents dispatched by Urbo, capital of state Tajigo. They were sent to abduct Milius. This was the culmination of some internal disagreements within the group. A mutiny.”

“All psychopaths,” Milius added. “Double-Y chromosomes, most likely.”

“Not Delfino…”

Milius shook his head. “Both were pathological, Dru. I spent more time with Deflino than you did, remember? Ludoviko was overt, but Delfino… they both played a confidence game.”

Dru said nothing. She had no argument.

The bodies were emaciated, most with scraggly beards clinging to tented cheekbones. The Tigans had it much worse in the Salis Majora. Urbo’s investment in their success looked to be threadbare. They were starved and had few supplies. The scene was more ambush than scuffle, close quarters melee and killing blows, a murder scene. They’d slaughtered their companions then stolen their supplies.

“You know the names of those who butchered these men?” Lo asked, his black eyes wide and curious.

“Ludoviko and Delfino. We encountered them heading sunward.

They abducted Milius; it was their mission. They used him to try to reach The Nexus."

"Why?"

"Their official orders were to reconnoiter the Nexus as a possible military asset. Tajigo and Vespera are adversaries, always looking for an advantage. But these men were prisoners, press-ganged into this with a promise of freedom."

"What happened to these two men?" Lo asked, looking about as if Delfino and Ludoviko might be lurking.

"Dru killed them," Milius interjected. "Shot them both—"

"—Milius… stop," Dru seethed.

Lo stepped away, his gauntlet raised. His rendered expression was a mix of surprise, fear, and fascination. The shusher was in the presence of a true 'killer', or so he imagined. What that meant wasn't clear. Lo, despite the implant, remained a cypher.

"Why did you kill them?" Lo asked Dru.

"They were dying. Delfino asked me to end his pain — euthanizasia— and Ludoviko…" she paused, struggling to find the words. "We couldn't help him."

"—Has anyone killed anyone on Ry, ever?" Miliu asked Lo.

"We're unable. There's no violence," Lo replied.

The implant not only flavored a perception, it conditioned impulse. Dru looked down at the knife. She thought about picking

it up and making a lunge at Lo. How would the implant stop her? Did it keep the shushers from killing each other, or did it stop them from killing anything? Maybe the shushers used robots as war proxies, turning Cy into one giant chessboard. Non-violent utopias had to be dysfunctional, how could they not?

“How did killing make you feel?”

The question seemed derived from perversion. Dru tried not to take offense. Lo’s preoccupation with barbarity was like a child’s, a forbidden adult practice only mentioned never witnessed.

“I don’t remember,” Dru lied.

“But these two men did this…” Lo gestured at the dead dotting the mirror glint of the water’s surface. “Was this justice?”

“No.”

Dru was angry, angry at having to explain herself and justify what she did. But overall, she felt numb.

They mounted their spiders and followed Lo. Their companion’s beacon was further shadoward than Lo had anticipated. Lo explained the initial wave of probes managed to only transmit within a limited distance of the Nexus. The far-flung probes, however, didn’t function for long. Their signals were weak and glitchy. This ‘malfunction barrier’ explained why no one had noticed the alien spiders roaming the liminal colonies.

“The entropy burden, even with its random component, increases non-linearly the further away from the return node, or the optimum terminus—” Lo mentioned.

“—The Nexus.”

Dru wasn’t a scientist, but she knew The Rip to be a faulty interstellar transportation system. Hadrian couldn’t understand how the shushers conjured such a space-time effect. Like a bulldozer, The Rip had displaced and consumed billions of tonnes of matter light years away. But only a small fraction of its topology was usable, and only a smaller fraction of that was stable.

The teleporter had to be fixed, but how? Collapsing sophisticated cargo into spherical containers, then shoving it through with no guarantee was clunky and kluged. A whole economy would have to be created just to locate random containers, then transport them back to the liminal via isopod or spider caravans. And then the swamps… The logistics of it was as outrageous as it was absurd.

Dru yawned out of habit. She wanted to sleep but wasn’t tired; she was never tired. Lo remotely tuned their suits internally using unseen switches. Part of the implants’ mechanisms was a chronic cortical stimuli. Lo would reject any request to make camp; she was sure of it. But she needed a break. Dru turned off

her suit’s clock and tried to ignore the hours. Lulled by the spider’s ambling, she shut her eyes and drifted into a hypnotic fugue. Thoughts tumbled through her mind in a quasi-psychedelic dance, almost like a dream. But any meditative peace was quickly smote by a powerful brain fog. Could the implant be removed or damaged? Maybe a heated blade stabbed into her skull would do the trick. With a severed link to her suit —her sole means of survival— she’d be hopelessly marooned.

Apart from The Rip’s ebb and flow, the terrain changed little. Circular shadows bulged into ovals as they drove shadoward. The air was thick and salt sting irritated her throat and eyes, exasperating her entropy-induced rawness. Playing with the holographic menu, she toggled her focus and zoomed in on the horizon. The sky was less hazy and more differentiated. Bands of blue broke into the shadoward sky, complete with the puffs of a lonely cloud.

Dru steadied the saddle to catch a glimpse of Luna Secunda. While not directly shadoward, the moon was close enough that Dru traced out the Tajigo Meridian. If they continued along a lazy gentle arc to their right, keeping the moon just to the left, they'd arrive on the Tigan frontier and Urbo’s deltas.

“Do you see it, Milius?” Dru pointed. “Luna Secunda.”

Milius pinched his left eye and squinted with his right,

shading his brow with his hand.

"Use your suit controls. You have to use the enhancement."

After frustrating minutes, he managed to zero in on the celestial body. "We're traveling orthogonal to the old route. If we keep this way, it's going to be a long traverse through the fluvial. Once we rendezvous with the others, we'll need to double back. Roman will need to work with Lo to route-plan."

"Once we regroup, we'll continue in this direction," Dru said, pointing.

"The Tigan deltas?"

"And beyond."

Lo was out ahead and Dru was unsure if he could hear them. So, she said no more. Instead, she shook her head and touched her lips to shush Milius then mouthed the words.

"Urbo?" Milius half-whispered. "We're going to Urbo?"

She nodded.

Leading the shushers to Tajigo wasn't a new idea; she'd thought about it before. While Urbo was the Tigan capital, it was also Sinister's largest city. Tajigo had three-fold the population of Vespera; it made sense. But her reasons were disingenuous. She wanted to hide her homeland, hold it at bay, even if it was only temporary. She didn't care about Tajigo. Ambivalence was too weak a word and antipathy too harsh.

Dru realized an alliance with Ry could be used by Urbo to subjugate Novum Pax. The Nexus would then become a weapon, a culmination of Delfino and Ludoviko's mission. By leading Lo and Ky to Urbo, Dru would be Urbo's unwitting agent. She had time to think. They were still a month or more away.

"Two kilometers, maybe three," Lo announced, slowing his spider so Dru and Milius could catch up. "The signal is full of noise. Something's interfering with it."

"Nothing broadcasts well this far poleward," Dru said, "and we're above the balloon latitudes. Maybe it's malfunctioning."

"Possibly."

They arrived at the beacon. Weaving through a spiral maze of spheres, they stood at the edge of a clearing. Each orb on the perimeter was nearly alike. Whatever mathematical solution that described the anomaly seemed intended, like a programmer's watermark, a wink and nod to an intelligent creator. The scene in the middle wasn't intended, however; that much was obvious.

Dru noticed the salt angels first, small and fluttering from perch to perch. She counted four nymphs, readying themselves for their shadoward migration. She zoomed in for a better look. Three contorted bodies —two nearly on top of eachother— and the warped chassis of half-expanded spider robots lay about in ruin. One body sat upright away from the rest. Dismounting her spider,

Dru felt dizzy and leaned against its abdomen to steady herself. Only the salt angels moved, nothing else.

“It’s them,” Lo confirmed. “It’s Ky’s beacon code.”

“Any vitals?”

“The datastream is too weak, and the signal is incoherent. Little power.”

“Good timing,” Milius said, with a smirk of gallows humor.

“No movement,” Dru said. “Are they dead?”

“Don’t know,” Lo said. “They should be switched over to a ‘stasis mode’ if vital signs warrant.”

“Stasis… like hibernation?”

Lo didn’t answer, preoccupied with some unseen holographic menu launched into the ether. Milius dismounted and approached. Dru was about to shout at him to stop, but any danger had long passed. She knew the Rip itself had killed them, nothing else. Dru and Lo followed Milius. Her neck tightened. She felt her pulse pound in her ears.

“A catastrophic entropy load,” Lo said. “At this locus, the probability of a successful transfer was minimal, if not negligible. The inference engine’s transfer calculator failed in the tuning subroutines. The new optimizer is still unstable.”

“You knew they were dead, didn’t you?”

“I wasn’t certain, and it would have only hurried us,

degrading our system-level efficiency. We risked malfunction… death.”

Dru closed her eyes and exhaled. Like a cold plunge, she lifted her lids and took it in. Hadrian sat a few meters away, hardly recognizable. His flesh was tight and scaly, broken in places, exposing vast bloodless wounds that went to the bone. His suit was brittle, its wrecked segments askew and barely attached. A yellow fluid drained over his cheeks from purpled eyeballs, collecting as a sticky resin in his beard. He sat crossed-legged, rigid like an ancient monk. The entropy blast must have been instantaneous, leaving him to die within the suit as it dissolved. Like a boiled crab, Hadrian still hissed and popped from within. The salt angels perched on his scalp like the headdress of an ancient priest.

Despite the horror, the scientist’s face held a frozen fierceness, eyes wide with a clenched jaw that crushed what was left of his teeth. It took a moment for Dru to see it. Hadrian was in the moment, a relic of the instant. He wanted to feel it, a true martyr, his body a calibrated receiver recording the remaining seconds of his catastrophic entropic demise. The experiment over, his body was now a shrine to his own will, to know the truth at all cost, Baphomet’s bargain. Dru found it morbidly fitting.

“Roman?” Milius called out. “Can you hear me?”

Dru turned to see Milius crouched next to the other two. The radioman was straddling Ky in a frozen attack, pinning him. Ky’s face was swollen and lumpy with pustules, some broken and seeping bloody ooze. Roman’s eyeballs had clouded over, shrunken and desiccated inside puffy eyelids. The machinery within Roman’s left arm was visible, the implant’s camouflage was no more. His hand was locked on Ky’s throat like a vice, so much so, the viscera from his trachea squeezed out in between the gauntlet’s three oversized fingers. The arm buzzed. Its grip clenched and unclenched in reflex.

“He’s not alive, Milius, that arm of his, it’s just malfunctioning.”

Milius, backed away. Dru shooed a salt angel from Ky’s knee, sending it fluttering into the maze of spheres. Amidst the stench of ozone and scorched coolant, Dru doubted Ky’s weapon was operable. Both suits were torn and ripped apart, but with the entropy loading, it was hard to tell if their destruction was a result of melee.

A light explosion blinded Dru. Salt particles ricocheted about and stung her throat and cheeks. Knocked onto her backside, she stumbled then scrambled away. Milius retracted into a ball. When Dru’s eyes cleared, Roman was nothing more than a molten husk of

char. Lo's plasma weapon had let loose, the focused ablation devastating what remained. His artificial arm, the fist still clenched, stood disembodied and upright like a flag pole. Blobs of sinew clung to the bone where the prosthetic attached to the shoulder. Lo stood prone in a combat stance.

"Why did you do that? He's dead! They're all dead! Stand down."

Lo relaxed, his weapon arm falling to his side. He approached, head cocked curiously. Lo was cold and detached. His ability to exhibit shock, grief, and horror had been edited or reprogrammed. As the lone ambassador of Ry's diplomatic corp, Dru doubted the bureaucrats of Urbo or Novum Pax would negotiate with him. The loss of Ky –more emotionally intelligent than his paramilitary counter– would do the shusher's mission on Sinister no favors.

"That should not have happened," Lo said.

"What should not have happened?" Dru said, tears welling and streaming down her salt-burnt cheeks.

"The attack."

Dru stood up and investigated the radioman. Like a bug held to a flame, the plasma pulse rendered his body unrecognizable. His teeth, juxtaposed with his blackened skull, were clean and shiny, burnished into an angry clenched grimace. The 'wrong'

done to Roman could not be forgiven. The trick of replacing his infected arm was a deceit. And while they all had been implanted, Roman's amputation was a more extreme violation.

He'd been sold on The Rip's promise. Responsible for his freedom, he believed in The Rip. The shushers were supposed to be his salvation, the benefactors Roman never had growing up. But after his arm, he saw them as another shade of the same masters, indifferent and cold. Eugenicists, all the shushers were orphans de-facto. As aliens, the Vespans were given even less agency and were nothing more than the random fauna from the Salis Majaro. While trying to be diplomatic, Dru couldn't argue against Roman's point. He'd been looking for an opportunity to bite back —Dru knew that— and the entropic catastrophe offered it. With the implant inoperable, Roman wanted to ensure Ky's death was no accident.

Dru felt the tug of the implant's leash. Lo admitted it as much; he'd control over them. He could neutralize either through violence or a tether they'd yet to tempt. Her skin turned clammy and sharp pains pinged her ribcage. She closed her eyes and bit her lip. The dynamic had shifted. Dru was no longer Lo's guide, she was his thrall.

CHAPTER TWENTY THREE: THE ATTACK

The landscape changed. Sterile white flats faded into patches of gray and brown. The shallow lakes deepened and the ground gave more. The clicks of their scuttling spiders muted into soft taps. Dru hadn’t noticed, but they were back among the isopod colonies, grazing on algae and sprouts of tar grass. They approached the fluvial latitudes, the vast swamps and boggy deltas that collected all of Sinister’s mineral-filled runoff and shadoward meltwater.

The three fell into a natural formation, Lo leading and Dru and Milius trailing far behind. With the implant, Dru had no way to know if Lo could overhear them. Like their journey from the rift to the Nexus, she would need to plead for rest. The implant kept them vigilant, but the monotony was torture. The entropic

effects were still chronic, and as such, the endless journey exacerbated her malaise, both physical and psychological.

"Roman had a thing for you," Milius said, his first attempt at conversation since they'd left their companions to their open graves.

"I know," Dru signed. "Poor bastard. He was confused."

"How's that?"

"The way we keep those boys penned up in those charterhouses, the orphans and the unvetted, it's criminal. They're not chaste monks; they made no choice. They're kept like prisoners," Dru lamented. "He was a good kid, and would've made a good husband, father perhaps. A younger 'me' might have even taken to him." Dru paused then continued. "I don't know what he thought he was going to get out of all this. Pessimism isn't a philosophy practiced by the young, I suppose."

"I think he knew in the end, more than I can say for you or me," Milius said.

Dru said nothing for time, then spoke. "When I doubted you, he stood up for you, and he was right. He believed in The Rip and he believed in you. He thought the Rip was his personal catalyst, and The Nexus a lodestar of deliverance. But in the end, the reality of it broke him. He wasn't prepared for the shushers."

"Was that why he killed Ky?"

"Maybe," Dru shrugged. "In the end, I think it was an act of rebellion. A message."

It was a message, whether it was Roman's intent or not. Lo had control over the Vespans via their implants. However, Lo didn't have the means to exert his will over all of Sinister's entirety. As she gazed at The Rip's dotted pollution, she realized she was being foolish; Sinister was in fact under a de-facto tyranny. Swaths of territory annexed by matter voids –objects of imposition– were impossible to ignore. Another world impressed into theirs, the encroachment was a physical subjugation. With its inert random dispersions, The Rip cared not whether it interrupted wasteland or farmland, buildings or rocks, animals or air. And as an agent of its creator, Lo had unsaid power. Sinister's bureaucrats –either in Urbo or Novum Pax– were now at the mercy of Lo, this alien emissary. They would need to do Lo's bidding if the planet had any hope of ridding itself of The Rip. Lo currently seemed unaware of this realpolitik, but he would learn.

"We're stopping," Dru announced, not caring if the shusher heard her.

A grove of lifeless trees offered respite. Dru had noticed them from a distance. She dismounted and sat in a patch of burnt

grass and looked up at the trees’ vein-like limbs crawling into the sky. Milius said nothing, but his face belied an idle concern.

The Salis Majora was no more, they’d transited its frontier, its salinity quickly ebbing. In its place was a hard aggregate loosened by the dribble of dying streams. No longer barren, vegetation clung to a land sculpted by a vast latitude of deltas. Standing water was fresh but ridden with the unnamed bacteria of shifting swampland. Lo finally stopped and circled back, lording over them as he remained on his spider. The spider's sensors —slaved to its master— followed Lo’s eyes as he scanned his surroundings. Dru waited for him to prod them on, but he stood comfortably still.

“Lo, I need to sleep —we both need to sleep. It’s not that we’re tired… but the drudgery, the routine. We’re getting confused.”

“Under the vitals menu you’ll find vigilance mode,” Lo said, gesturing to the gauntlet. “But I don’t understand why you would bother.”

Dru quickly toggled through the system’s half-gibberish until she found the noted menu. She swept the switch and felt its vertiginous effect then collapsed. Laying flat, the dried grass poked her neck and cheek. A wave of fatigue. Her mind clouded as

thoughts drifted into dream fragments of the absurd. She was quickly asleep, coma-like,

When she woke, Lo sat cross-legged next to her, eating. She checked her clock. Six hours. Milius remained asleep, curled up like a pillbug. A fog clung to her brain, hobbling thought as she struggled with her senses.

“What happened?”

“Synaptic release. I was going to warn you. A heightened state comes at the expense of a neurological steady-state. Consciousness implodes. Very sudden.”

Dru had the power to sleep all along, but the mechanism was camouflaged by a messy interface. Dru stood slowly, wobbled a bit, and sipped water. The spiders stood idle near the tree, gently swaying about as if driven by some limbic priming. A hundred meters beyond, the remains of salt angel nymphs littered the ground. Among the ashes, a detached wing fluttered like a flag.

“Did you do that?”

Lo nodded, flexing his weapon hand.

“Why?”

“Calibration.”

Dru took Lo’s explanation as intended. His engineered pacificity admitted Baloq Ry’s reality. On Sinister, his implant

regulators were gone. Like a child, Lo was clumsily exercising a newfound violent liberty; she and Milius would have to be careful. She sat back down as Lo finished his porridge. Fiddling with her holographic menus, she debated whether to reenable vigilance mode. Now that she could turn it off, her stress abated. Hungry, she tore open a pouch and indulged a bespoke curry as she waited for Milius to wake.

"How did you find Sinister?" Dru asked Lo. She'd taken for granted Roman's theory that Cy and 'Dexter Domu' were the same, but wanted the shushers to confirm it. Confounding her was the nature of Baloq Ry's clue finding, and how they unearthed the final trajectory of L'Estelo Magnus.

"We discovered the relic."

"I don't understand."

Lo laconically explained it, and Dru did her best to piece it together.

Back on Tero, with L'Estelo Magnus lost –its fate unknown– the starship's legend grew. Having vanished, the homeworld was only left to wonder. Had the cosmic elder gods actually called their followers home? The myth of the Capricorn pilots had captured the shushers' imaginations, apparently. The Baloq Ry, aboard their colony ship, decided to retrace the voyage of L'Estelo Magnus. Lo's account lacked explicit detail, but what he did

mention alluded to a cryptic preoccupation with the occult. As much as the notion seemed outlandish, Dru remembered her ancestors were also susceptible to such stuff.

Before the Schism, Followers of Capricorn were defined by their persecution back on Tero, resulting in a post-Planetfall dogma of superstition enforced by brutal rites. A belief prevailed that ‘handmaidens of Baphomet’ possessed L’Estelo Magnus’s pilots, enchanting and guiding them through astral gates by manipulating metal and mathematics preternaturally. The numinous attributions by ancient priests were endless, implausible, and ludicrous. Even in the wake of The Schism —the doomsayers dismissed— a mystique remained, mutating into folklore.

After arriving and finding their star system bereft of humans, the Baloq Ry eventually detected an astronomical anomaly: a highly elliptical comet-like body only noticeable centuries after they’d colonized their moon Ry. Using inference engines and orbital telescopes, the shushers regressed the anomaly’s orbit. It had little mass —that of a small asteroid— but it defied natural explanation. It pulsed with a low frequency signal that repeated every one-hundred seconds with atomic accuracy. No longer a natural body, the object was categorized an artifact, a relic.

Celestial mechanics predicted it to be a captured interstellar object. Analysis showed its trajectory aligning to Tero; but that much, Dru already assumed. It was the probe, Dru thought; it had to be. The shushers were confident L'Estelo Magnus transited their system, as ancient homeworld charts indicated, but had found no previous evidence. Their star system was filled with nothing but ice giants and a vast accretion disc of rock fragments. Only Cy and its moon offered anything habitable.

With years of increasing iterative precision, the Baloq Ry eventually calculated the final trajectory of the L'Estelo Magnus using the probe-relic's orbital ephemeris. Modeling its path, they determined the sharship's destination was a main sequence star a few light years beyond. Using spaceborne interferometers —an array of telescopes— the shushers found Sinister's tiny white dot.

"We tracked your planet, blinking in and out," Lo said. "Once we refined the probability transfer function and aligned the system's casting towers, we initiated the bridge."

A glimmering dot, the white polar expanse —the staring eye of Sinister— became their target. Like a space-time bullet, The Rip hit Sinister's sunward pole then splintered into a billion relativistic framagent peppering the planet's unshaded face. The Nexus was the point of impact, the spot where the pebble first

kissed the pool's tranquil surface. Then at a speed faster than a synaptic bolt, The Rip expanded. Parsed within shards of time, fractals erupted into a realm of tumultuous continents. No eye blinked quickly enough to see it. Whatever kernel drove its mathematics, its functional time constant abided by split instances.

Milius awoke at last. Hair nappy and eyes creased, he looked confused. Somehow he intuited Dru's newfound knowledge, of which she was in no rush to divulge. No new truths were revealed, outside of the mechanical. The shushers were cyphers and would remain so. They adhered by rules familiar yet alien. To outsiders, their reality was marked by indifference. The Baloq Ry –as they called themselves– had no investment in understanding Sinister's denizens. They saw the planet as they wished it; they'd already made up their minds.

The three mounted up and resumed their journey shadoward, with Lo in the lead and Milius and Dru trailing behind, as before.

"What were you two talking about?"

"Talking?" Dru quipped.

Milius shook his head knowingly.

"Lo described <u>how</u> The Rip came to be, but not the <u>why</u>."

"Ah, the secret of the universe then?"

Dru smirked. "We'd be fools to think our friend up ahead…" she

gestured to Lo, “…knows the truth. The shushers are like us, just on another plane of naivete.”

Dru told him what she learned. None of it surprised Milius, but the details he found interesting. He imagined shusher shrines dedicated to the ‘relic’ probe, its shape the inspiration for religious iconography and otherwise. Dru thought of the temple finials from their illusory dormitory window, oblong lemons pointing into the sky. Maybe they were an abstract symbol of the pod, similar to the one where she’d dispatched Delfino.

Dru looked through the mirage ahead. Lo transformed from an intrepid alien into a wavering paladin, come to deliver the holy land from Sinister’s heathen children. But Lo and Ky weren’t wild-eyed fanatics, endlessly haranguing on in sermons. No. The shushers were insect-like pragmatists of single-minded efficiency, impossible zealots. A paradox Dru couldn’t find sense in.

The fingers of stagnant pools swelled into listless streams. They followed the water like corpuscles. Navigation was confusing. Dru pointed and Lo followed. The swamps were an endless maze of ambiguous interconnected lagoons and billabongs, and the land in between grew more boggy. Grass, saber palms, and the skeletal trees of a forgotten genus swelled in ranks. The

spiders waded in and out of the waterways as if built for amphibious locomotion. Banks of steamy mist were frequent, hiding The Rip and transforming its black orbs into dim gray planets. Lo slowed, waiting for Dru to show him the way. The suit's inertial compass was precise, but Dru was tasked with negotiating the pitches of incremental wilderness. Dru pointed and Lo scuttled out ahead, again leaving the Vespans to the back rank.

"What do you know about weapons?" Dru asked Milius.

He shrugged. "Little. That's your department."

Dru stayed quiet, the spiders' mechanical noise filling the air.

"But I've had a thought," Milius added. "Something I've been wondering about."

"Pray tell, but remember…" she said, gesturing in Lo's direction.

Milius ruminated, taking Dru's heed, then spoke. "Roman's weapon —Li's gauntlet— why didn't you commandeer it? You're the weapons officer."

"As a rule, I try to avoid unfamiliar weapons. My father's advice. Advice I should have given to Roman, but didn't."

"Weren't you curious?"

Dru shook her head.

“Why?”

“I’ve never cared much for rifles and pistols, much to my father’s chagrin,” Dru explained.

“But you volunteered for this expedition, as a weapons officer,” Milius said, incredulous. “And it’s your vocation — what do you mean ‘not interested’?”

“What’s a weapon?”

“A tool?” Milius replied, puzzled.

“A hundred kilometers shadoward, in the glacial estuaries — just shy of the terminator— there’s an aquatic slime, a really simple organism. You wouldn’t think anything of it. Part of it clings to rocks, soaking up weak sunlight, the rest forms a floating skirt.”

“Okay,” Milius interjected, confused. “And…?”

“The slime has enemies, the armored slug. It feeds on the slime, specifically the slime on the rock. A handful of slugs can kill a hectare of slime in a few wakes.”

“Does anyone care? There’s more types of slimes and algaes than people on Sinister.”

“No one cares. That’s not my point.”

Milius gestured for Dru to carry on.

“Riverstalkers live there as well, big as pelican ox, giant legs, puffed up electric-blue feathers for the cold, and talons

like daggers. They kill people," Dru said, pausing to have a look around. "The river stalkers use baleen to filter the water, mandibles ballooned with dart krill. They scoop up everything, including slime."

"Do they actually eat it?"

"Inadvertently, but the slime produces a neurotoxin that provokes a craving—"

"Let me guess… for armored slugs," Milius said with a smirk.

"—The slime —this basic organism with no sentience, thoughts, or emotions— created a weapon by proxy, expending no energy other than altering a latent neurotoxic chemical chain."

"You're inspired by slime mold?" Milius scoffed.

Dru shrugged.

"Are there any armored slugs left?"

"More than before."

"Wait. You just said…"

"Too many armored slugs will eventually kill a riverstalker. The calcium ossifies their innards. But for a time, it keeps the slugs away, enough for the slime to regrow. No weapon is perfect."

"I'll say."

Tall grass overtook the wetlands, so high only the ghosts of empty trees offered a horizon. Lo again conferred with Dru on

the route. The Nexus indicator offered a consistent bearing. Dru asked Lo if the spiders were capable of fording deep water. Lo made mention of an ‘aquatic mode’ but Dru’s imagination failed her. She scrolled through the menus but found nothing. The spiders’ carapace was creased with unexplored hatches and panels, possible hiding places for inflatable or articulated pontoons. Maybe the spiders were submersibles, airtight along with her environmental suit. But with the water opaque as mud, crawling along the bottom was something Dru wished to avoid.

The Rip, while not as thick, confused the way. Dru remembered the swamps from before. The journey then was easier. Afloat on punts, they poled along with only a modicum of effort. The three clambered onto a berm that followed a meandering firth. In the mist, the skeletal trees stretched and disappeared into the haze. A halo refracted the sun into an anemic rainbow, corrupting the swamp’s monochrome. Splashes and croaks of the unseen interrupted the hydraulic whine of the spiders. Lo’s head cocked and twitched about, his plasma arm half-raised as his retractable helmet flipped back and forth.

“Twitchy. Not so confident now, is he?” Milius whispered, noticing Lo’s agitation.

“Anything that makes Lo’s gun-hand itchy makes me nervous,” Dru said.

“He’s got some distance on us. I can barely see him, just the blue lights on the spider’s chassis,” Milius said, squinting with his one eye.

Like parasites, fleshy green tendrils wound their way up and along the branches of dead trees. The tattered corpses of salt angels dangled from the limbs along with larger creatures. Dru saw them move about as if by the wind, but the air was still. With the creatures long dead, the swaying was from the movement of the tendrils themselves and their sticky globular fronds. Hopelessly stuck, the animals were being digested in the open air, their bodies melted into a crumpled blob. Multiple tendrils entangled the larger beasts, wrapping around them.

“By the high priests of Capricorn, Dru. It’s the drosera. They’re everywhere,” Milius whisper-shouted, looking around in dread.

Dru nodded. “Do you remember what I told Ava —what I told everyone?”

“Of course, but—”

Dru put her finger to her lips.

Milius looked ahead at Lo, mouth open.

“Milius…” Dru shook her head. “Quiet.”

He nodded.

Along the berm, spheres crowded the strip of dry land. The

obstacles slowed their pace causing them to bunch up. The spiders half-collapsed to weave their way through The Rip’s narrower passes. Dru scouted the haze for movement.

Once through, the ground opened into marsh inundated by an adjacent eddy. More skeletal trees poked through the tall grass like fingerbones. Coiled around their bleached trunks were more drosera. Plants adapted to nutrient poor soils, they grew weak roots that extended into the mud and formed a lattice network, tens of the massive sun dews integrated into a single quisi-organism. Too weak to anchor the plants, and too pathetic to draw minerals from the soil, the hair-like roots served another purpose. The drosera sensed all ground movement, pinpointing creatures via a matrix as they plodded through the wetlands. The plant had no eyes or ears to stalk its prey; it didn’t need them.

Barely visible in the mist, she saw a tendril uncoil, its fronds unfurl, and its glands swell with secretion. Dipping into the unseen, it captured a salt angel nymph or a water beetle. Rising skyward, the writhing creature struggled against the goo. Lo noticed the movement and took stock. He’d his weapon prone, guided by cues fed to him by the suit’s multispectral sensors. He looked at Dru and Milius and waited for guidance.

“Which way?” Lo said.

“Keep going, but veer to the left, just slightly. Try to follow the open water along the mangrove,” Dru said, pointing.

“Those plants…” he pointed. “What are they?”

“A parasitic vine. They’re mostly harmless,” Dru lied. “Salt angels, glitter queens, and fly dragoons get stuck in them, but not much else.”

“Do they have a name?”

“Hadrian was our de-facto botanist, but alas…” Dru shrugged, flashing an eye to Milius. “Not sure its taxonomy,” she lied.

They continued on, Lo traveling ahead. Dru slowed her spider, its ten legs moving more up and down than forward. The grass thickened and more drosera unwound. Dru turned sharp right with Milius in tow, leaving Lo to his unwitting advance. She sped up, willing her spider into a skittering stride. A good distance away, the both turned around to look.

“He’s slowing down. I just see his head,” Milius said as he stood in his saddle to peek. “He’s looking for us.”

“Keep walking. Steady rhythm.”

“He’s stopped.”

“Are you sure?”

“Completely.”

Moments passed.

“What’s he doing now?”

“Aiming.”

The pulse did nothing, as Dru expected, just a sizzle along the drosera’s fronds, its globules aflame like torches. The plant had a hold of Lo, plucking him off his confused spider. Another drosera unwound and grabbed hold. A cooperative plant, the sun dew’s tendrils acted as one, each getting a purchase to hoist the shusher aloft. Dru expected a scream or a shout but heard nothing. More flashes. The gauntlet’s weapon fired at random as Lo struggled against the plant’s impossible adhesive. Soon, the weapon would sputter, the capacitors in its ion pump lamps depleted.

Meters up, a third tendril attached, clutching the shusher like a cephalopod’s tentacles. Dru twisted in her saddle for a look, careful to keep the robot moving. Lo’s suit hydraulics and pneumatics slowed. He moved less. Secretions and enzymes were making quick work of him. His face, what Dru could make of it, was distorted by golden ooze. His flesh —cheeks, neck, brow— morphed into a pink and yellow gel. More fronds clamped on and hugged him like disembodied arms.

“By the high priests of Capricorn,” Milius said, his voice a whimper.

“Just keep moving. Don’t stop.”

Secretions would eventually liquify him, the digestive acids

eroding away the suit's malleable joints. Once breached, the suit would seep nutrient rich fluids from his ankles, knees, and hips, then drip onto the hungry fronds below. Like a gibbet, the shusher's husk would decorate the swamp.

Dru remembered the attack.

#

It occurred during a portage to shortcut a meandering oxbow, but the ground in between was dense with drosera. Captivated by the carnivorous plant, Dru studied the sun dews and took note. The plants' quarry were mostly airborne creatures, dragon wings, king gypsies, salt angels and the like. The drosera waited until the insects perched atop deadfall or a low lying palm, then struck. Dru came to conclude it was in that instant –when movement ceased– that the plant targeted its prey.

Wakes before the attack, Dru had brought out the high-precision solar sextant. Too much mist and unable to properly balance the punts, Ava protested the attempt, arguing it was useless. Headstrong, Dru ignored her sister and attempted a reading anyway, but a current shift knocked their boats together. Perched on the gunwale, Dru dropped the instrument into the murk.

An argument broke out. Ava demanded Dru dive down and retrieve it. Someone mentioned the slipper crabs hunting along the banks

and the waters swarmed with mites. Hadrian tried to intervene, insisting the reserve unit was adequate. Eyes red and exhausted, Ava was furious at her sister. After another fiery sibling exchange, the boat was quiet. No one said anything as Druscilla stripped to her underclothes and dove into the turbid flow. By some miracle, she caught a glint of brass in the silt. Retrieving the instrument, she swam up, gripped the keel of Ava's punt and held herself underwater. Seconds turned into minutes as she felt the panicked shuffling of boots above and heard muffled shouts of her name.

Lungs burning, Dru emerged and dropped the sextant into the punt before climbing aboard. Ava accused her of playing a trick, of which Dru was guilty. But she denied it, straight-faced and without emotion. Upon folding it up and stowing it, Hadrian discovered the sextant's solar lens was missing. Ava said nothing, refusing to look or address Dru until they reached the oxbow.

Ava insisted the shortcut wasn't necessary, the river only a few extra circuitous kilometers. Hadrian didn't believe her and sided with Dru, as did Roman. But Ava couldn't be convinced. Dru argued if they hauled their punts across the narrow isthmus and kept moving, they'd quickly link with the meandering waterway and save a wake or more of pushing through a read-clogged river.

Again, an argument broke out between the sisters, and the ranks broke. Half the expedition voted to risk it, while the others stuck with Ava.

Dru remembered Ava's glares, eyes afire. Scornful, angry, it was a look she'd seen a thousand times. But now a melancholy clung to her gaze, forlorn and weak. Leading the expedition had taken it out of her; she'd no energy left to fight her sister's relentless stubbornness.

Leaving the balkers behind with Ava, the mutineers tugged and pushed their loaded punt overland. The mud sucked onto their feet, slowing them to a near standstill. Panicked, Dru shouted to keep going, her voice raw and broken. Then she saw a drosera start to unwind. Cato, the expedition's medic, tripped over deadfall in his haste, a shaft lancing his groin. The filthy wound would eventually rot, killing him the following wake.

They eventually stumbled into the opposite river and toppled back into the punt. The others abandoned Ava and started to follow, but they'd forgotten Dru's warning. Stalled in the muck, they stayed put, afraid to leave their punt. Dru screamed for them to abandon it, but they were frozen. When it was over, the six survivors —including their mapmaker Marcus and their mortally wounded medic Cato— floated helplessly, watching in horror from the safety of the open water as the others —still

moving— dangled from the drosera's gallows. The punt was littered with brass glints; Dru had lost track of her ammunition, firing wildly. The bullets did nothing. The sun dews had no organs, no nervous system, no blood to drain. But Dru couldn't stop. Milius eventually stayed her hand, gently grabbing her shoulder, prompting her to cease fire.

For wakes, Dru said little, refusing to debate whether the expedition should continue. But the answer was always obvious. There was no doubt. For wakes, the image of her sister's silhouette, dangling from the sundew like a limp leaf, was all she could see when she closed her eyes.

#

"What now?" Milius said, looking up at Lo's dangling body.

"I don't know."

Lo's spider joined them, operating in tandem with Dru's via its collective programming. She led them away to a slough of mangrove peppered with spheres.

"Why?" Milius asked.

"Not sure. I just…"

"—Was it Roman?"

"Maybe," Dru said, struggling to explain. "I needed to buy us time."

“Buy us time?” Milius said, eyebrows perked. “You? …me?”

“Us —Vespera, Tajigo, etcetera.”

“What time are we buying? The Rip, the shushers… we can’t change any of it. We’re at its whims; I think we learned that. This cataclysm is beyond us.”

Dru guided their mechanical caravan to the safety of a rock outcrop then stopped. “You’re right; It’s beyond us. But perhaps we can sculpt it, shape it. Shape what’s to come… we can bend it, manipulate it.”

Milius opened his mouth as if to speak, but said nothing.

“Milius, I need you to return to Novum Pax and tell them everything,” Dru said. “They’ll believe you; they’ll have to, the suit, the spider… your eye. Can you do that?”

Milius nodded, his face pinched. “Why not you?”

“Because, I’m not going back.”

Dru hadn’t sorted her thoughts in a way she could explain. Stalking shushers across the vast Salis Majora was absurd. And the Baloq Ry would adapt, revising their algorithms and refining their weapons in ways impossible to conceive. Something else compelled her, a feeling, a compulsion, an impulse. None of it made logical sense, and she’d little hope of convincing Milius.

“What’re you going to do?”

“Not sure.”

Dru would leave the debriefs, interrogations, and investigations to Milius; she didn't feel guilty. As the last witness to Vespera's ill-fated expedition, the civil engineer's personal account would be his legacy, as he wanted it. From Milius's memories, Sinister would build dossiers, scientific theories, and engineering schematics. They'd piece together his reported minutia into a full report on the 'Baloq Ry Invasion' – or whatever they were officially going to call it. Hours of hypno-therapy, wired to galvanometers and oximeters –her abdomen tightened with the prospect. Better Milius. The thought that a tactical decision of planet-wide importance, based on her misremembered fragments, gave Dru cold sweats.

Her designs on the Salis Majora were provoked by a primal urge. In communing with the Sinister's ghosts –and its future wraiths– Dru saw the wasteland as a limbo, an unknowable and carefree present. To go back to Novum Pax –to her home– would provoke a pining for a reality that no longer existed. And the thought of returning home without her sister, the guilt and shame of it would be unbearable; her parents wouldn't understand. She mumbled, paused, and spouted half-sentences. But as she fought for words, the civil engineer's eyes softened. He could have tortured her with endless questions, but he didn't. Instead, he said nothing, nodding with a downcast eye.

“You should reach the first Vespan outpost in a week, maybe two. The delta’s waterways will merge, then just follow the river banks,” Dru said.

“I remember, and unlike you, I don’t mind ‘vigilance mode’. I’m thinking a week, maybe less,” Milius said. “And what should I tell them about you?”

“Whatever you want.”

“There’ll be rumors, conspiracies, that sort of thing. They’ll come looking for you—”

“—They won’t.”

Milius shrugged.

Dru looked at Milius’s sunworn face, grizzled by salt air, framed by white stubble and a bouffant of wiry gray. Without his insectoid eyeball, she’d never noticed his inconspicuous warmth. She sensed an undeniable ‘good’ about him. Despite the circumstances, Dru was challenged to think Milius might be the last Vespan to see her alive.

“Goodbye, Milius.”

“Goodbye, Druscilla.”

Dru watched him turn into the steam and disappear. Lo’s spider, defaulting to some tandem mode, joined her as she willed her own robot sunward. Guided by the gauntlet’s compass, she headed into the heat. Experimenting, she managed to discharge

the suit’s plasma weapon, now unlocked. The Rip’s multitudes offered plentiful targets. And as many times as she unleashed a sizzling filament and ensnared a sphere in a crackling web of bolts, she never grew tired of it.

Back in the Salis Majora’s endless white, Dru felt like a nomadic native. A thousand years on, another vanguard of L’Estelo Magnus —however small— was reclaiming Sinister’s sunward pole. The more she explored her alien skin, the more she transformed in mind and spirit, a denizen of a hostile wasteland now tamed.

As she followed the rocky switchbacks down into the rift, the wounds of unease and worriment dissolved. The smell of the waterfall’s mist, mixed with the hints of aromatic creosote and the dry sweetness of fruit flowers, evoked a nostalgia for a time she never knew. The pioneer outpost, now familiar, welcomed her back. She existed now as a hybrid denizen of two worlds, a second Eve in the forgotten paradise of an estranged sun.